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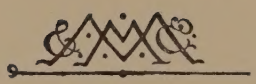
NOVELS IN TWENTY VOLUMES

VOLUME NINETEEN

FUN OF THE FAIR



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BY CECIL HUNT, R.W.S.

"However, the church was there, of course, and a sizable dwelling or two."

(*Parson and Clerk.*)

FUN OF THE FAIR

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON
1928

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CONTENTS

		PAGE
I	The Horseshoe	1
II	The Coming of George	15
III	God's Good Beast	35
IV	The Masterpiece	55
V	The Rope	69
VI	The Revenge	83
VII	Parson and Clerk	103
VIII	The Red Rose	121

12516

PAGE

IX

THE QUARRY 131

X

THE CURSE 157

XI

THE SNOW-STORM 175

XII

THE VAMP-DISH 193

XIII

FOR VALOUR 211

XIV

HALF-MAST 231

XV

THE SILVER BULLET 245

XVI

ANOTHER LITTLE HEATH-HOUND . . . 285

XVII

PROVIDENCE AND TOMMY CAUNTER . . . 295

XVIII

THE TWO WIDOWS 311

XIX

THE PROMISE 321

XX

PAGE
THE RACING CUP 337

XXI

A BARGAIN'S A BARGAIN 353

XXII

TRIUMPH OF GEORGE 373

I

THE HORSESHOE

WITHOUT A DOUBT 'tis the Board Schools as have made our childer so much wiser than us, and, for my part, I be a'most frightened to catch my grandson's eye nowadays when I'm uttering my opinions in general. My age is up home seventy-five, an' he's fifteen.

"Luck!" he says, in his shrill voice; "really, grandfaither, at your time o' life, you did ought to know that there's no such thing as luck. Nought happens by chance," he says. "'Tis all a matter of nature's laws."

What fool have told him there's no such thing as luck, I can't say; but once the youngster was for pulling down my hoss-shoe an' flinging him on the rubbish heap. Then I up an' spoke to him short an' strong. "You touch it," I said, "an', so old as I am, I'll give you the properest hiding as ever a young youth catched for his follies. Luck or no luck," I said, "if it weren't for that hoss-shoe, *you* wouldn't be in the world for one; nor your faither neither. A imp like you, as ban't old enough to hop out o' the nest yet, to talk to me about hidden things, as if you was the gran'faither an' me the child! You bear yourself more seemly, Billy Maunder," I said to

the lad, "an' possess your soul in patience; an' maybe, when you'm a thought older, and a long sight wiser, you'll hear tell 'bout that hoss-shoe. Then, if you've got any of your faither's high sense and trust in God, you'll be the first to cherish the creature an' keep it 'pon your door same as I do."

He smiled wi' all the wisdom of fifteen in his round face; but he never dared speak disrespectful of the hoss-shoe no more, for his faither, as became a wise man, was of my mind. He knew the tale, and he knew what luck meant as well as most; for there's nought makes you understand the force of the thing like having none yourself and seeing fortune fall to your neighbours.

And the tale of the shoe be just this.

Fifty an' more years agone I lived to Stickle-path, an' one fine afternoon, having been to a revel in Okehampton, I must needs come back-along over the Moor. I was only jolly—no more; but well I remember being much bothered wi' two cocoanuts an' a packet of fairing as I was carrying back to my sister—a maiden as never had overmuch nature in her, and, for that matter, died on her twenty-fourth birthday.

Up over where the sojers come nowadays an' bang their cannon and cut the place to pieces wi' their horses and gun-carriages, I chanced to meet a man going in the Moor gate. Then one of my cocoanuts must needs roll away again; an' the chap stopped it with his foot, just afore it went into a brook. I thanked him, and the simple soul axed what it might be that I was taking along so careful.

"'Tis a cocoanut as I won at the revel down to Okehampton," I said.

"Lord!" he said, "I've heard of 'em, but I've never see'd one afore."

"Us'll sit 'pon this here stone an' I'll scat un abroad, an' you shall taste un," I says.

"Bain't poisonous, I hope?" he axes me.

"Bless your life, my dear, half the heathen in foreign parts live on 'em," I told the man.

He was a sandy-headed, amiable sort of young fellow, an' lived to Belstone. His name was Ned Bloom, an' he had a good few relations in them parts. I knowed some of his family well enough, but had never met with him.

Well, we ate the nut to the shell, an' he much enjoyed it, and offered to see me home, for he said afterwards that he reckoned I was a bit more than market-merry, and he felt sure I should never get my other cocoanut and the fairing back safe if there wasn't somebody there to help me—specially over the river.

"No," I said, "I won't let 'e do no such thing, for I'm steady as time an' don't see nought double worth mentioning; but I'll come along with you, for Belstone's on my way; an' us'll have a drink at the Hearty Welcome for luck."

It comed out after that he worked to Arscott's quarry and was a very respectable and well-thought-upon young chap.

On we went, talking 'bout them as we was commonly acquainted with, and then just by that hill that falls down to West Oke River under Harter Farm, what should I see but a spick-an'-span hoss-shoe lately cast and shining in the evening light like silver!

"A bit of luck, mate," I said; an' afore you could speak the word I'd bent down, catched up the trophy, and flinged it wi' my right hand over

my left shoulder. 'Twas a gert cart-hoss-shoe, and I flinged it hard.

"Hell!" shouts out Ned Bloom. "What have you been an' done now, you silly fool?"

I looked round, and there he was, dancing, wi' the shoe at his feet and both hands over his right eye.

'Twas a terrible come-along-'t, an' only God's mercy that I hadn't cut the chap's eye out of his head an' dropped it on the ground like a poached egg.

"I'm blinded!" he says—"blinded for life so like as not. My poor mother'n sister! 'Tis the 'house' for 'em if I'm done for."

I cussed myself blue for a know-nought gert lout; but I was proper terrified, I warn 'e, because, looking at the poor chap's eye, I see'd that all the life was out of it, and it had shrunk back in the head of the man like a pricked bladder.

"Best to tie the member up an' take me so fast as you can to a doctor," says Bloom.

He was a darned sight calmer than I was, I'll allow. But the thing I'd done very soon sobered me down. I knowed too well what 'tis for work-folk to lose their sight, and I felt, if the worst overtook the poor fellow, I should have to try an' do his job as well as my own for evermore.

"There's no doctor to Belstone except between ten and twelve Mondays and Fridays," he said; "so you'd best to lead me back-along to Doctor Pierce in Okehampton so quick as it can be done."

With that I tied up his eye, as seemed to have fallen into his head worse than ever; and I took his arm and we marched back that awful long tramp to Okehampton.

He suffered a terrible lot of pain; and one thing brightened up his mind, and one thing made it rather dreary.

I beginned about how I'd work for him till he could get to it again, and he said: "That's all right so far as it goes. My Provident Society, the Order of Dartmoor Druids, will look after me for a bit; but 'tis the future I'm dreading, because when one eye be took out of the eyehole it often chances that t'other gets rotten too, an' so a man's left with no light at all."

"Don't think of such a gashly thing," I said, trying to be cheerful. "We can't say yet if you've lost an eye. There may be enough to build up a new eye upon. There's nothing as doctors can't do nowadays, and 'tis well known that Pierce be one of the best." But my heart shook while I talked to the man.

'Twas a beastly wet evening, and we went palstring through the mud, and I never thought we'd get to Okehampton at all. But the doctor was to home by good chance, and he put some cautcheries to the eye, and cheered us a thought, and said as he'd come and see Ned next evening. The eye was to be kept in the darkness of the plague of Egypt, and the best luck as could happen to Bloom, if all went right, was that the doctor might be able to let in light in a month or so. But he paid little heed to that along of the joy of knowing that his sight might be spared to him.

He didn't ballyrag me, and he axed me to say no more about it; and when I damned the hoss-shoe for all I was worth, and wished I'd lost my own eyes afore they dropped on the cussed thing, he said I was a chuckle-headed fool to talk that

way, because such an accident might have happened to any lively man who found a hoss-shoe and didn't stop to think if there was somebody walking just behind him.

Presently I got a spring cart and drove him home; then I took the cart back to Okehampton; and then I went home myself wi' my tail between my legs. My sister axed for her fairing, poor dear; but I answered a bit short, I'm afraid, and told her the devil knowed where that was—I didn't. For when the masterpiece of misfortune fell upon me I'd dropped her parcel and t'other cocoanut on the Moor, and forgot all about them. She forgived me without a murmur; and my mother, who was old and foolish, went down on her knees in the kitchen and thanked the Almighty to hear that the man wasn't going to have the law of me. An awful fear of the law she had. Then she began about my taking the pledge, in her usual obstinate and determined fashion; and, as I always did at these oneasy times, I promised I'd do it with the light of the very next day.

Come Sunday I sneaked over, meek as Moses, to have a tell with Bloom and make my apologies to his people; and I took him two ounces of shag tobacco, and the first gooseberries of the year picked off our own trees for to make a little pie for the poor chap. He was sitting in darkness, and the Lord knows I'd have liked to do the same; but his women-folk had me out in the light and axed questions enough to sink a ship, till I felt the same as a criminal in the dock, and fancied how sentence of death could only be a question of time. The man's mother was gentle, as mothers will be. She'd seen worse trouble

than this, and knowed I was young myself, and found out quick enough I was cut to the heart about it, and meant to do the right thing if it cost the boots off my feet; for I'm a soft-hearted toad, and if I'd been harder I might have made the world bend to me a bit more than ever I have done. But his sister—Miss Tryphena her name was—dash my wig, she did rub it in! A little bungy woman, small and neat as a hen, wi' beautiful black eyes that went through you and out behind, and a tongue — not sharp exactly, but awful well able to curl up the hardihood of a man; and wi' a way of seeing your excuses coming and answering 'em afore you made 'em. I never want to spend a worse ten minutes than I did with her while her mother went to see if Ned would care to have a talk with me.

"A pretty thing," she began, "to play them May-games like that! and I don't care who hears me say so. You ought to know better, Mr. What-you-call-yourself."

"My name be James Maunder," I answered her, very humble.

"Poor chap, to lie at the mercy of the first fool——" she began. But that didn't go smooth, so she started again.

"Of course you was drunk, or you'd never have done such a rash an' wicked deed," she went on.

"Begging your pardon, I wasn't," I answered; "else how could I have helped the poor fellow back to the doctor's? Market-merry I may have been, as many a better man before me; but bosky-eyed I was not, an' God Almighty——"

"That'll do," she snapped out. "Us don't want none of your swearing here."

"We had just eaten a cocoanut, miss," I told her.

"Eaten a fiddlestick!" she replied.

Then, after a few more efforts to get her to hear sense, her mother luckily comed down-house and told me I might go up and see Ned. So up I went, an' glad to go, an' of course I found the man, despite his troubles, a darned sight more sensible than his sister. He was very glad of the 'baccy, an' thanked me for bringing it, an' said as the doctor was much pleased with his eye and hoped it might be well in a few weeks.

"Which I do too, so help me," I said to the man.

Then us had a tell, an' I see'd there weren't a spark of malice in him. In fact, he talked just as civil as I might talk to you.

"I'm afraid your sister won't never pardon me, mate," I said. "She've given me a proper dressing down, I do assure 'e."

"Don't you take no heed of it," he advised. "Tryphena be glumpy and glowry sometimes, an' there's a touch of lemon in her without a doubt."

"'Tis a lesson to me, I'm sure," I told the man. "Never a drop will I take again outside meal-times."

Then I left him after an hour or so, and crept downstairs.

"Hoss-shoes! I'd hoss-shoe him!" said the young woman to her mother very loud, as I sneaked out.

Three days later I went again, and it got to be a regular thing for me to do so. I told the chap the news, and cheered him up best ways

I could, and without a doubt he looked for my coming. He mended slowly, but the doctor was satisfied with his progress, and wouldn't let the cure be hurried.

Then came a tragedy; for Arscott, the mean-spirited beast, turned off Ned Bloom from his quarry and said he couldn't wait no more for him. Old Joshua Bloom brought the news, and said 'twas all of a piece with Arscott's character, and foretold as Ned would never get another job. But Joshua was a man who never took a very hopeful view of life, and he had 'workhouse' written on his own forehead, for that matter.

That night I had the bad luck to meet Tryphena in the lane as I comed away; and she talked to me again very forcible, and said I was a 'gallyvanting robber' and a 'itemy toad,' and a few other harsh things. Of course, you can't answer much to a female—especially a good-looking young one—but my manhood rose up in me, gentle as I was, and 'twas getting dark too, so I couldn't see her flashing eyes. Therefore I just spoke to the point and chanced it.

"You're a little cross-grained baggage," I said, "and 'twould sarve you very well right if I was to give you a good shaking. For two pins I would! What the dowl more can I do than I have done? 'Twas a cruel accident, and no more to blame in me than the needle be to blame when it slips and pricks your finger. And I won't have no more of your sauce, so I tell you. Next time you let your tongue run against me, I'll—I'll do something as will astonish you."

"Then 'twill be something sensible," she snapped out; and of course I let her have the last word and went on my way. 'Twas only a

windy threat, for what could I do really? Besides, somehow, for all her sharp speeches, I'd got to think a lot of her in secret.

Then Ned grew better, and couldn't meet with no work; and him and me became very friendly, and I felt as if I'd have given the coat off my back ten times over to find him a decent job with good money to it. But, beyond the handling of rough stone, he had no cleverness.

I'd left him the last day he was to be in the dark, and was walking back to Belstone by the fuzzes on the common, when I comed across his sister. We met in a cross-cut of the gorse, and never did she look neater and more unkind of countenance. She 'peared doubtful how to act, so I spoke first.

"'Tis good news that Ned's going to see the blessed light to-morrow, miss."

"The blessed light ban't no use, if you can't get no blessed work to do in it," she said.

"Be careful," I warned her.

"Careful! Perhaps you'd like to knock my head off, too, with a hoss-shoe—for luck?" she cried. "That for you!—I hate the sight of you."

"Do you?" I said. "Then, by God, you shall hate the taste of me too!" An' with that, be shot if I didn't kiss her!

How I comed to do it, I can't tell—such a backward chap with the maidens—but I did; and Tryphena turned into a raging fire; but she couldn't speak for astonishment. She stared, and I left her gasping and gurgling in the middle of the fuzz bushes, and took my hook so fast as I could run.

Next time I saw Ned 'twas out of doors, and I felt mighty pleased to meet him in the air,

specially because, owing to a most unlikely chance, when drinking down to South Zeal, in the Oxenham Arms, I met a man as wanted a quarry hand. I was so full of the job I'd heard tell about, that for the moment I forgot Tryphena and my owdacious deed. Young Bloom was very interested at what I told him, and I promised to see the man again and try to fix it up, and show him Ned's papers, which were good. Just afore I left him I remembered.

"I hope your sister haven't got anything more against me?" I asked.

"Not as I know about," he answered. "She haven't named your name for a week. Though she's glummer than usual, if anything."

With that I fell a-thinking upon the wonderful nature of the female mind, and I had an awful longing to see her again and say how the thing had happened in a manner quite accidental and unexpected—owing to some twist in my character.

Next time I went 'twas evening, and I took a bit of good news with me, for I'd got the job for Ned all right, and with it went a shilling a week more than he'd took to miser Arscott's quarry.

But it happened that the young man and his mother was out seeing a neighbour, and so I found Tryphena all alone.

I expected a flare-up, and was ready for 'most anything, down to going on my knees for forgiveness; but she rose from her sewing, looked me up and down as gentle as a calf, and said: "Good-evening, Mr. Maunder, I'm afraid Ned's out."

"Very glad of it," I answered her. "Longer he bides out, the better I'll be pleased."

"I'll tell him you've called," she said.

"I'll tell him myself," I replied to her. "I wish I thought you'd got such good news for me, Miss Bloom, as what I have for him."

Her bright eyes wasn't so bright as usual, and her manner was that mild that you'd hardly have thought she was the same maiden.

"I've got no good news," she said, "an' never shall have. What be my life but to suffer an' suffer?"

"Nobody knows what 'tis to suffer till they'm married an' got childern," I told her—being a thing I'd heard my mother say. "The good news I want is to hear tell that you've forgiven me for my scandalous deed."

"You were mad," she said.

"There was method in it, however," I told her. "You mind what I promised—that I'd surprise you?"

"Yes—you did."

"An' you mind what you said—that if I done a sensible thing it would surprise you? So if you was surprised, 'twas a sensible thing I done."

"You ought to blush for it to your dying day, all the same," she said; "no man ever dared afore."

"An' no man shall ever dare again—but one; an' 'tis for you to name him, Tryphena Bloom. The Lord's my judge, but I've loved you heart and soul ever since the first night you sauced me so sharp. An' the harder you was, the more I felt drawed. Now, miss," I concluded, so dignified as I was able, "I shall be very much obliged if you will unfold your feelings and acquaint me if, in course of time, you could abide me, or if you couldn't. If you can, then

us'll begin walking out from Sunday next onward till we'm tokened; if not, I must bear the cruel answer best ways I can."

"Who be I?" she said, wi' her li'l lips trembling an' her eyes all of a mist. "Who be I, to please a male? So short-tempered an' cranky as I be? If you'd slapped me, 'twas all I deserved; an' I thought you was going to do it when you met me in they fuzz-bushes; but you kissed me—you kissed me; an' I loved you from that minute, if not afore; an' what a poor little fool like me can do to better your life, that I will do. You'm a man," she said, "an' if there was more as had your pluck to kiss afore they spoke——"

There she choked, an' I got my arms around her, cuddling of her, and swearing and kissing, and pawing of her about like a bear, when in comed her mother an' Ned.

"She'm mine!" I roared out—to set 'em at their ease like. "She'm mine—gwaine to marry me soon as ever I get a shilling or two on my wages!"

Mrs. Bloom got her darter away from me by main force, and told me I ought to be ashamed to go courting like a wild beast. But then the girl spoke for me and said 'twas all right, and she liked it that way; and that I was the husband for her, and that she loved me and had done for a good bit.

And my blessed Tryphena comed to the gate with me when I went home. Life not worth living? Who can take away the memory of the first time a loving woman comes to your arms? An' holding of your first little one, hot from under his mother's heart? What's Eternity got better?

Very first walk us took was up-along to the ford called Culliver's Steps, and then over where I throwed the hoss-shoe and near put out the light for my brother-in-law as was to be. And if us didn't find the iron there where it had falled! 'Twas my luck, you see—none else's; an' I gathered un up so careful as a purse of gold. An' my girl, she said, "Now let's look for the cocoanut, Jimmy."

But I said, "Oh, bless the cocoanut! Let it bide for the varmints to eat, so as they shall have their bit of luck too."

"You'm a soft old dear," she said; an' with that we pitched down behind a stone, as we always did do when she spoke gentle things like that to me up 'pon the Moor an' nobody moving.

II

THE COMING OF GEORGE

AS A YOUNGSTER I held a great many fine and large opinions, more by a long sight than I hold now. For, at seventy years old, you've generally found that you wasn't born to set the world right, though you felt sure 'twas your bounden duty at twenty-one. In fact, them as get wiser with age, as we all should, generally shed a good many of their convictions while they go along, and find that what made 'em so savage and impatient in youth have often got another side to it, which shows up when you're in sight of three score and ten. I knowed an old doctor once, who told me that when he began business he had twenty cures for every ailment, and when he'd finished he'd heal twenty ailments with the same cure.

But my next-door neighbour, Arthur Arscott, was very different from that. I never in all my born days knew a narrower-minded chap—to say it kindly. A regular neck-or-nothing Tory was Arthur, as wouldn't allow anybody no liberty but himself, and hated the progress of the world, and hated steam, and hated nitrates on the land, and swore something shocking at the new machinery from America that was just beginning to shake

us up and open our eyes how to save labour and time. A snail in his shell be a go-ahead, pushing creature to what Arthur was, and in our earliest days, I remember, he made such a deuce of a fuss about the Reform Bill that he very near got thrown out of the parish-room for being impertinent to the gentleman who'd come down to explain things to the village.

Yet to-day, if you told Arthur he wasn't to vote for his member of Parliament, he'd be the first to cry shame, I'm sure. As for me, I was his opposite in those days, being hot for liberty and the rights of man and progress and free trade, and free everything, including a bit of free fighting if need be.

In them two semi-detached cottages on Paddock Hill we lived, where you drop down into the village from the north. There we dwelt as bachelor men, side by side for ten year, and the talks we had of an evening over the back-garden fence would fill a book. We differed about pretty near everything, but were the best of friends till the coming of George. Arthur Arscott was a prosperous, honest, busy chap, well thought upon by the gentry in general; and he ought, by rights, to have been a gentleman himself, for he had all the ideas of 'em, and thought it quite right and proper for 'em to live for fun and hunting foxes, and never do no work, and eat what they hadn't earned, and keep the people undermost. To hear him on the rights of property, you'd have thought Arthur owned Devon, and most part of Cornwall too. But what really did belong to him was a freehold cottage in the village and twenty yards of garden along with it. This he rented to his grandfather for

five shillings a week, and Arthur was a regular lord of the manor when he talked about his house and land and his money coming in, and so on.

Once I axed him why for he didn't have a bailiff, or some such person, to collect his rents and look after his tenants; but Arthur, to do him justice, never see'd a joke in his life, and when I made one in his company I had to do the laughing myself. Different though we were in our outlook upon the world, we agreed in a few things here and there, and we had the same interests and amusements also. We was both church-goers, both small drinkers, and both fanciers. We'd kept rabbits at one time, and then took to poultry and caveys. Indian game birds had been a special line with us also; but for the minute caveys, or guinea-pigs, was what we both set store by. And very clever we were at 'em.

He bred a pure, white Angora cavey, and I was great on the long-hairs too, but my strong point was tortoiseshells. He was Portreeve of the manor and a very clever stonemason, that being his business; and I was postman and vicar's churchwarden, and a few other odd things—with small money to 'em. We looked after ourselves in them days, for although I was courting, only me and Minnie Bloom knew about it. Her people had other ideas an' wanted her to take a linendraper at Ashburton—a very nice man, but terrible weak in the lungs, and wi' shoulders that wouldn't hold up his coat. But he was well-to-do, and the Blooms, being a far-sighted folk, guessed that if Minnie was left a widow by some sad chance, she would have the wherewithal to bear up against it.

Life ran on regular lines for me and Arthur,

and if it hadn't been for our great ideas and ceaseless argeyments it might even have grown a thought dull. But we were like flint and steel, and always struck a spark when we met; an' none the worse friends neither. Indeed, difference sharpened our intellects and kept 'em from growing rusty.

About the way to handle rabbits and poultry we were pretty well agreed, but we differed on caveys. Rare tussles we had at the Agricultural Shows for ten miles round, and now he'd win and now I would; but in the cavey class, for five year now, it was nearly always him or me—excepting the time at Totnes, when he thought I was bound to win and I thought he was; and be blessed if another chap from South Brent, as nobody had ever heard of, didn't beat the pair of us! But 'twas an accident and all a mistake, as every fancier agreed, except the judges and the chap from South Brent.

At the fatal time of the coming of George I'd won the Ashburton Cup twice, and only had to do so once again to make it my own. But Arscott had got a pair of right-down beauties that year—hair like silk and white as snow and eyes as pink as a rose. And such a style to 'em! A proper li'l lady and gentleman they was, and looked at you through their hair that haughty that you was a'most minded to touch your hat to 'em. And mine was a grand pair also—wonderful coats—black and orange—more like a pair of great chrysanthemum flowers than pigs, and a bit heavier than Arthur's. He reckoned to beat me in autumn, and I knowed he well might; but still my youngsters was coming on beauti-

ful from day to day, and I hadn't given up hope.

Then one morning in late April I see Arscott, and went over to him in his garden with a letter that I'd got from my married sister, Sarah Gregg. He looked up from the ground, where he was watching his show caveys have a run on the grass.

"Morning, Matthew," he said. "You'll have to hand over thicky Cup in September. These here pigs be the bestest ever I reared—proper masterpieces without a doubt."

"So they be," I answered; "an' so long as you beat me, I shan't worrit; but I don't want for anybody else to."

Then I told him about the letter.

"'Tis from my widowed sister, Sarah Gregg," I told him. "She lives to Bovey, and she'm not very well-to-do, and her eldest, George, is turning her hair grey by all accounts—as they often will if the father's took afore his time. There's no doubt he's a wilful youth, and terrible rash and self-willed; but, all the same, no boy as had my sister Sarah for his mother can be all bad. She's written imploring for me to take him for six weeks, and try and lick sense into him, and larn him man's discipline, and get him a job somewhere by day to keep the toad out of mischief."

"Don't you do it, Matthew," said Arscott to me very serious. "Us don't want no spoilt boys messing about here—quite enough in the village as 'tis, and to spare. A boy's a hateful thing at best, and this here boy, by your letter's own showing, be the sort that's better not born at all—a proper limb of the Dowl, no doubt. And if his own mother says so, you may easily guess what other people would say."

But Arthur was always very much against the young. He took childer for his natural enemies; and when you do that, the nippers soon find it out, and, treat you according.

"A nephew's a nephew, however," I told him; "and seeing as the boy haven't any mankind at Bovey to lift him to his duty, I'm afraid I must do as my sister wishes. She's a very good woman, and have got five, and I ought to treat her as a brother should."

"You'll go your own way, of course," answered Arscott. "For that matter, nobody ever heard of you doing otherwise. But you'm wrong. 'Tis a very dangerous and thankless task to meddle with a fatherless child. You think you'm going to please his mother, but you're not; and the sterner you are with him the less she'll like it when it comes to the point. He's spoilt for good and all, I'll wager, and would no doubt be a lot better in a reformatory than along with you."

"You didn't ought to be so harsh," I told him, "nor yet condemn a young youth like that afore you've set eyes upon him. And, be it as it will," I said, "'tis on my conscience that I ought to have a shot at the child, and I'm going to do it. And if you and me can't knock sense and good manners into a boy of thirteen, then more shame to us."

"Don't you drag me in!" cries Arscott. "I won't make or meddle with the creature; and you mind he don't meddle with me. I don't want him my side of the fence, and he'll know it very quick if I find him here. Since you be vain enough to think you can break him in—a simple, untried bachelor like you—then try it, but for my part I'd sooner teach a bullock to dance than have to do with a human boy."

So we left it at that and talked about the caveys; and the same evening I wrote to Sarah an' told her as I'd try my hand at George an' see if I could help the child to justify his existence and be a credit to his mother.

He very soon came along wi' a clean shirt and a Sunday suit, and a tooth-brush, and six collars, and three pair of socks packed in a brown paper bundle—all speaking of the goodness of his mother. And if he'd been half as nice as his clothes we should have done very well; but certainly Sarah had said no more than the truth when she called him a rash lad. I never saw a boy quite like him. He'd been born without a conscience seemingly, same as some poor folk are born without an arm or a leg, or like they Sebright banteys, that haven't no male plumage. The sense of what he owed his fellow creatures had been left right bang out of Georgey.

He might have been a Fiji Islander's child, and didn't show no more understanding of right and wrong than a hawk. An' as for his duty to his fellow men, it was real news to him, though he never forgot what he owed himself, or thought he did. A brown-faced, bullet-headed boy, with hair like sealskin and eyes like black diamonds, as would size you up swift as a flash of lightning, and then look away again. A rather thin sort of boy, with bird-like ways, swift and sudden, and quick hands, always in mischief. A terrible self-possessed fashion of boy, as never got in a temper, but had an amazing art of getting everybody else into 'em. His wish was to go to sea, or else be a gamekeeper; but, as I pointed out, there was a mighty lot for him to learn before he could hope to shine in such orderly callings as them.

Georgey told me that he liked me very well before he'd been in my house a day; and Arscott judged that was a bad sign, but I hardened my heart against the lad's offered friendship for the present, and told him that he'd come to me to have a sight of his duty and what the world expected from him.

He fought two local boys the second day after he arrived, and one he licked and the other licked him; and then he got another dusting on the top of that, for the mother of the boy he'd whipped catched him coming home an' smacked his face for him. He returned to me with a bloody nose and very well satisfied with his day's work and his new company. And two nights after, he hid in the hedge for the lad who'd beaten him, and throwed a rope with a noose on it over the chap's head, and dragged him twelve yards through a pig's run before the blessed youth knowed what had overtook him.

Luckily it wasn't the season of fruit, else I make no doubt Georgey would have been catched red-handed and taken out of my charge afore he'd been along with me a week. But the birds were building and he was on to them like a jackdaw, though he never seemed to care about their nests unless he found them in private grounds, or the game preserve, or other people's gardens. He comed to me in a grand rage once and his eyes flashed under his black eyebrows.

"I've found a cuddy's nest in old Arscott's wall behind his fowlhouse," he said, "and I've spoke to the man very civil about it, and axed if I may heave out a stone or two, so as I can get my hand to the eggs, and I've sworn to Heaven

I'll put the stones back again after, and the carrot-headed old devil told me to get out of his sight, or he'd fetch me a whisterpoop on the ear-hole! That's all you get for being civil to people."

"Don't you talk about 'devils' to me, please," I said, "and why for should Mr. Arscott let you pull his wall down? You be a deal too busy after the birds' nests."

"I likes to blow the eggs and make 'em into necklaces for the girls," he answered me, grinning all over his face—and him only thirteen years old!

"You'd best to leave the girls alone, George," I tells him. "An', what's more, I've got work for you on Monday next, weeding for Farmer Westaway in the valley. You're to have sixpence a day, if you labour to please him."

But Georgey hadn't yet reached the idea of labouring to please anybody but himself, and I weren't very hopeful, for the boy seemed a lot too glad at the news. And, sure enough, he hadn't been gone more'n two hours o' Monday, when Squire Luscombe's keeper fetched him home by the ear. I gave the man half-a-crown to let him off, since he'd done no more visible harm than trespassing; and then I got my nephew a job down on the river at a wheelwright's yard, where there was men to watch him. But after three days of it, and just as I beginned to feel a ray of hope, Ned Blake, the master—a good friend to me, but a strict Wesleyan of rather harsh principles—catched Georgey kissing his ten-year-old daughter in the dinner-hour, and so the boy came home-along presently, sore to his sit-down, but perfectly cheerful and contented about it.

"They don't want me to Mr. Blake's no more,

Uncle Matt," he said, "because I promised Nelly Blake to marry her one day, and give her my first week's earnings, if she'd let me kiss her in sight of three other boys down there. An' she agreed to it, and her father catched me."

Alive! I never did see such a live boy. Tingling with life, as you might say, and all his dreadful unsleeping energy and invention poured out the wrong way. I axed him, for my own information, why he didn't make an effort now and again to do right, an' he said he'd got no objections in the world to do right; but he couldn't for the life of him see that what he did do were wrong, an' it puzzled him cruel why nobody never looked at things in general from his point of view. He was terrible obliged to me for trying to larn him sense. And the knowledge he liked to know about, such as caveys, he'd grasp in no time; but when it came to duty and discipline and obedience to orders, I might so soon have tried to teach a badger.

Mind you, I liked the boy, in a sort of way, through it all; for he never played no tricks on me, and behaved very decent so long as he was at my elbow. But I very soon saw that he wouldn't be along with me for a month, let alone six weeks; for him and Arthur fought from the hour he comed, and I never see a man loathe a lad like Arscott got to loathe Georgey. He pretty near turned white when he catched sight of the youth up the street, and every mortal thing that went wrong, 'twas always my nephew done it. Then arrived the climax, which led to a still more dreadful affair, and George cheeked Arthur before my face, and I had to take a serious view of it. 'Twas between our gardens, and the boy

was sitting on the fence and chopping chunks off it, for no reason but to prove if his knife was all right after I'd sharpened it for him; and Arscott spotted him, and was out through his back-door in a moment, just as I meant to order George away.

"You get off there, you hateful imp!" said Arthur. "Next thing you'll do is to bring down them rails and fall atop of my lettuces!"

"I'm on my own side of the fence," snarled George, "and I be in my right to sit here; and be damned to your lettuces! An' if I'd got a pair of ginger whiskers like yours, I'd drown myself in the river!"

Well, there stood Arthur, and there stood I; an' Arthur, he never said a word, but just looked panting at me, as though to ax:

"What are you going to do about that, neighbour?"

So I takes my best ash sapling to Master Georgey and gives him the properest hiding that ever a strong man gived a very bad, insolent young boy. I kept at it, too, and rubbed it in with all the might of my muscles; and George shut his eyes and suffered so long as it was in his nature to do so. At last he gives a yell, and then I stopped with an aching arm. An' Arscott cheered up wonderful and encouraged me. In truth, he only stopped smiling when I gave over.

"There!" I said, when I fetched my wind. "There, you bad-hearted, useless, saucy scoundrel, that'll teach you to call your betters names! An' if I hear any more against you, I'll do it again! Ten times a day I'll do it, for you'm a good-for-nought as can't be taught through the

12516

heart, so we'll do it through your hide! Now you march up to your chamber an' go to bed, and bide there till I be pleased to come to 'e!"

He went off, trembling, very thoughtful-like, and Arthur lifted up his voice and praised me.

"You've done me good," he said. "I haven't felt so well satisfied since that little wasp comed here. An' if the boy's soul is to be saved—though I doubt it's possible—he'll have to be lathered like that every day of his life—the Sabbath included. Don't you spare him, Matthew Sweetland, and remember that every howl he howls now may save him and other people a groan come he grows up!"

But I weren't so pleased with myself as Arthur was, by a long sight; for 'tis a very painful thing to give pain, and a worse to lose your temper with a creature too weak to hit back. I took the boy a drink of milk and a big lump of seedy cake after dark; and he thanked me and, to my surprise, listened very patient while I preached the law and the prophets to him. I told him all I knew and a bit more, and then I fell back on his mother and assured him she was weeping for him by day and praying for him by night; and I told him he was a disgrace to the very name of boy and a blot on civilisation, and so on. All of which he took like a lamb, and then, when his milk and cake was finished, he spoke.

"I've never been beat like that since my father died," he said, "and if you was to look at my back I dare say you'd be surprised. An' if I was so strong as you I'd go in next door and wallop that beast till he yowled for mercy!"

"You'll go in next door to-morrow and beg

his pardon for your insolence, Georgey; that's what you'll do!" I said. "I've been a lot too easy and hopeful with you; but never again! I warn you that it will be a word and a blow in future!"

"Well," he said, "you'll kill me before I ever ax pardon of Arscott! He did ought to ax my pardon. He'm one of the hateful sort that must have something littler than himself to bully, if 'tis only a guinea-pig; but he ain't going to bully me! 'Tis him, not you, I've got to thank for this welting, an' I will—and pay him for it, too!"

"As to that," I said, "we'll see, George. If a man like me can't manage a bit of a boy, 'tis surprising and not much to my credit. Your mother have sent you to me to break you in, and do it I will, if I've to break your skin in the process. I hate hitting you—much I hate it; but what the mischief else can be done with a stiff-necked young fool who won't learn no other way?"

"Then I don't think 'twill be quite good enough to stop along with you, Uncle Matt," he answers as cool as you like.

"Stop you will, however," I told him. "I'm your lawful guardian and keeper, by your mother's express orders, and the sooner you cave in and listen to reason and try to be a good lad, the better for all parties."

"I reckon this village ain't going to suit me," he said in his calm, maddening voice.

"Ah! No place where there's honest, God-fearing people will ever suit you, George," I answered. "You'll have to go over-seas to the murdering, man-eating, heathen savages afore you'll find your friends."

He cheered up at the picture, and forgot his bruises.

"'Tis the very thing I want to do, Uncle Matt! I want to go to a land where you can carry on just as you be built to, without making a lot of fuss and trouble."

"I'm glad to say there ain't no room in this world for that land no more," I told him. "Now you go to sleep; I've had about enough of you for one day. Say your prayers and ax your long-suffering Maker to make you over again and put a conscience in you. Us must all be born again, for that matter," I assured him, "an' 'tis more than time you was."

"Good night, and I hope as you won't find yourself too tired to eat your supper," he said, cheeky to the end; and that was the last time I clapped eyes on George Gregg or heard his voice for twenty years.

Come morning I went up to find the rascal, because he hadn't lit the fire and put on the hot water—a task I'd set him from the day he came. But his room was empty, and there was no mark of him except a few clothes with holes in 'em. He'd donned his Sunday suit and gone off in it. Of course, I judged he'd nipped back home to his mother, and I felt that, though he'd beat me in a manner of speaking, yet I'd make shift to get on without him wonderful well. But presently I found my mistake, for, going down house to light the fire, I marked a sheet of paper tore out of my ledger and stuck up in the midst of the mantelshelf, where I couldn't fail to see it.

He'd writ a message for me in ink, and, knowing his poor speed in penmanship, I judged he must

have started on it by candle-light so soon as ever he heard by my snoring I'd got to sleep. His spelling was a thought uncommon, but his meaning was as plain as you could always trust him to make it. And this here's what he said:

"My dere uncle mat: I don't think I'll bide along with you no mor becos if you be going to beat me like today, I shan't be suited. I'm going to sea tomorrer, and if the ship fetches up at one of they savage places weer you can get a run for your munney, then I'll mitch away from the ship and settle down there, and I'm very much obileeged to you, though you think I am no good, and some day I'll take the libbetty of showing you I am some good when I come back-along after my aventurs with booty and such like. And I am just going out to that Arscotts back yard, and I'm going to take one of his white caveys with me. So you will win the cup at the show with your caveys, and that fiddel-faced old beast will tare his ginger wiskers and dance with rage, and some day I'll take good care he nose I done it. He is a loppsided scarecrow and I hope he will soon die. Your affecksionate neffew,

GEORGE GREGG."

Well, there it stood, and I felt the perspiration break out on my neck, for well I knew the scamp would be as good as his promise. And two minutes afterwards I found he had been. I heard a deuce of a noise in the back garden, as though a bullock had got in and couldn't get out again, and there was Arthur in his slippers, with his braces and his whiskers both flying, and his face like a chapter from the Lamentations. He drove

right in and come up to me, where I stood staring afore me holding Georgey's letter.

"Matthew Sweetland," he cried, wi' a queer voice as seemed to come out of his stomach rather than his throat, "my fowl-house was broke ope' last night and my champion white sow cavey's stolen!"

"I know it, Arthur; I know it!" I answered the man; but as I looked at him I couldn't help thinking how true George's description of him was. "This is a very tragical moment for me, Arthur, as well as you."

"And you are at the bottom of it, and I'll get you in clink for this, if it costs me the flesh off my bones!" he said excitedly.

"No, Arthur, you won't," I answered very calm; "somebody may have to go to clink, I grant you, though 'tis a case of first catch your hare, and he's got a long start; but it won't be me, and I'm a good bit astonished you can allow yourself such a thought. I'm innocent as the unborn, and you ought to know it, even though you do find yourself in a passion. There's been a masterpiece of wickedness done, without a doubt, and if you'll get yourself in hand and read this letter, you'll see who the sinner was. And as for me, I'd have sat up every night, from now till the show, to watch over your caveys."

"Whoever done it, you was behind 'em!" he swore. "And I'll read no letters. You'm as good as a robber, and, if there's justice to be got, I'll get it proved against you afore I'm a week older. And I hope the law's strong enough to make you smart to your dying day. And if it ban't, then I'll take the law into my own hands. You mark my words!"

With this rude and silly talk the poor soul marched off, and even at such a moment I couldn't help feeling a thought surprised to find Arthur was such a downright fool. But as he wouldn't help me, I did the best I could for him, and after breakfast got down to the police-station and told inspector that my nephew was off, most like on his way to Plymouth.

"He's a brown-faced boy in a blue cricket cap, and he's got one of Arthur Arscott's white guinea-pigs in his pocket," I told the man.

Nought was heard, however, and not a sign of George reported; and, two days after, if I didn't get a summons all right and regular from the Queen to go afore the Justices at Totnes! Which I did do; an' there was Arscott in his best blacks, and a lawyer to state the case, and half my neighbours to see what the upshot between us would be. But I didn't take no lawyer. I relied upon George's letter and my known character.

I read the letter and handed it over, and the Justices was very much interested in it. And I told their Honours all that went before the fatal night; and they axed Arthur if I telled truth, and he couldn't do less than grant that I had done so in every partickler. And the Bench believed the truth, which is more than they always do, so there was an end of the business till they found Georgey.

By noon, after the night he went, a hue-and-cry had rose for him, and yet, so far, they hadn't catched the boy. He'd got to Plymouth in a very simple fashion, for it turned out that, early the next morning, he'd met a lot of schoolboys going to school at South Brent, and he'd offered them Arthur's cavey, and they subscribed one shilling and ninepence among 'em for the creature, and

with the money George had took a railway ticket for Plymouth. But he must have got there hours before the search began in earnest, and it looked as if he'd escaped to sea all right, for not an eyelash of him could be found.

Then Arthur's words came true about my sister Sarah, for she stepped over from Bovey to give me her opinions, and I never want again to spend an afternoon with a woman who has lost her firstborn and thinks 'tis my fault. She knew he was dead, of course, and it wasn't till her blessed boy sent her a bit of news about himself that she forgave me. Then she invited me over to drink tea one Sunday, and I heard what had fallen out. He'd written from Her Majesty's Ship *Impregnable*, one of they old three-deckers in Plymouth waters, used as a floating school for the Royal Navy; and there was George larning to be a sailor! He'd got mixed up seemingly between the Service and the Merchant Marine, and somebody had put him on the right road, though afore he'd been aboard forty-eight hours he'd have given much more than he'd got to be ashore again. Because the wonderful ways of a boatswain's mate had come to my nephew, like the Voice that came to Paul on the road by night, and he soon began to see a glimpse of reality as was quite new to him. Having catched him, the Navy very properly wouldn't let him go again, and as he'd given himself a new name, so as not to be traced at Plymouth, nobody ever thought he was the boy wanted at Totnes. Me and his mother bided quiet about it too, for when Providence takes a hand in affairs it's a pretty sound rule not to interfere.

So we let a bit of time pass, and George took to his new life and told 'em his real name; and in process of time he made a very good sailor, got his stripes regular and, presently, went out on station and rose in the Service very creditably to us all. For there's no place on earth like a battleship for putting the fear of God into a bad boy.

And I may add that Arthur and me made it up in a fashion after a good few months were past. He got back his white cavey for five shillings, which I paid, and it was none the worse for its journey in George's pocket. But when the time came and we showed against each other, my tortoiseshells beat him, though only by a narrow shave on points. And, of course, he always swore that but for the fearful shock to his Angora sow, as threw her back a lot, he'd have got home the winner.

By that time his slow mind had grasped I was innocent against him, and he forgived me in his surly way and passed the time and cussed the weather as usual. But we never had none of the old argeyments over the back fence, and, as years went on, I believe he got to see I was right in politics and he was wrong—not that he allowed it for a moment.

Arscott never married, but when my Minnie's mother died, and the hopes of the linendraper were done with—owing to him going into a decline and passing away, like a leaf off a tree, poor chap—I had her, and no man need wish for a better. And Arthur sent me a book of sermons for a wedding present. He turned a great deal to the Bible Christians for his comfort as he got older, and, though the sermons weren't exactly

what you might call hopeful reading as to a man's chances hereafter, yet they done very well to stand flower-pots on in the parlour window.

Twenty years was sped afore Georgey came to see me in all the splendour of a petty officer's rig, and I took him along to call on Arthur.

"A very good afternoon to you, Mr. Arscott," he says, shaking my old friend's hand. "And I hope, master, you've forgiven me?"

And Arthur looked out of his dull grey eyes in his usual doubtful fashion.

"Yes," he says, "I've forgiven you, George Gregg, but I ain't forgotten you, and I'm glad—I'm glad, George, that the Lord haven't neither."

III

GOD'S GOOD BEAST

UNDERSHAW FARM, for all its snug situation and sun-facing front, is among the loneliest habitations at the southern foothills of Dartmoor. Not a cottage stands within sight of it, and the nearest hamlet lies four miles distant by road. The two-storeyed dwelling-house nestles bowered in apple trees, which lift their topmost branches to its thatch; before the entrance extends the farmyard, surrounded by stables, cow-stalls, and a great barn famous for its oaken beams; behind the habitation spread the orchard and a little sloping meadow. The farm fields lie below and the farm road winds away among them. Another road skirts the yard and then climbs steeply by a rough and water-worn ascent through the great forest behind.

Walter Snell, who succeeded his father at Undershaw, seldom left home, yet now, on this April morning, he was about to do so, and his wife, his widowed sister, and a flock of children assembled to see so rare an event.

Walter was only going away for three days, to attend a cattle fair on the other side of the Moor; but an incident so exceptional awoke his simple circle to great excitement.

"A town's a town," said Mrs. Snell, "and since you be going to a town, father, I've drawed out a list of things you've got to fetch along."

"What the hoss can carry, I'll bring," declared the farmer, and he ran his eye over the rough heads of two small girls and three small boys. The least of these in short frocks stood by his mother, while she held a baby in her arms. "And I won't forget Maggie, nor Milly, nor Jack, nor Bob, nor Timothy, nor you, Anna."

He turned to his widowed sister as he spoke—a slight, fair woman older than Walter, but like him. He was short, sturdy, and of a high colour, with large shoulders, pale whiskers, and a well-shaped head. Great physical strength belonged to Walter Snell, and he enjoyed other blessings of good sense and a laughter-loving, easy nature. An old man held his horse, but he delayed and still chattered, while his children showered entreaties for toys and their mother called for silence.

"Be quiet, Maggie, and you, Jack, and get to work, Bob. Why for should us all be wasting our time because father's going to the fair? And if he was to bring half you want he—— But don't forget the wool, father; and if you can pick up a box of kippers, such as you got ten year ago, 'twould be a great addition."

"And mind that turkey food, master," urged the ancient who held his horse. "There ain't no call for you to bring it, but you'll do wise to order it. The young turkeys be a brave lot, and 'tis a thousand pities not to favour 'em all us may."

"Trust me, Jonas. I've got it wrote down. And remember you mend that loose board in the orchard fowl-house, else us shall have the foxes

in. Drat 'em! There was a pair of 'em in the meadow last night dancing together as if the place belonged to 'em. Well, good-bye, all. And if you childer can't be good, be so good as you can!"

Having cracked this old jest, Mr. Snell kissed his wife, patted the last baby's cheek, and mounted a great grey cob. He disposed himself in the saddle, uttered a few more directions to Jonas Blake, his head man, and then jogged solidly off with Jack and Maggie running beside him. They trotted the best part of half a mile, then stopped, waved final salutes and walked back together.

Maggie was a pretty little flaxen child of ten years old, who promised to be a beauty, for she had her mother's blue eyes and pure complexion. She was spoiled, and ruled the other children by force of character, though Jack, the eldest, numbered two more years than she. He was a red boy—freckled and fiery; and then came Bob—a brown, shy person, who hated strangers and loved the woods; Milly, also brown and shy, and the sworn ally of Bob; and Timothy, his mother's pet. The girls were already useful, and Mr. Snell was proud of Jack, who, already, hated school and longed to be on the land. At present, in Easter holidays, the children were at home all day, but the elder ones made nothing of the tramp to the village in term time.

The household, despite its loneliness, was entirely happy, and also prosperous, for Mr. Snell owned his property, knew his business, farmed diligently, took long views, and balanced his good years against his bad with native intelligence. He came of thrifty folk, and had married a single-hearted, hard-working wife, who loved the business of maternity and saw no shame

in a quiverful. In her husband's sister she had a helper worthy of her, and Jane Snell always declared that Anna would some day marry again, if ever a man invaded the lonely homestead and discovered her quality.

But few came that way, and the only bachelor who worked for Walter Snell lived with his mother a mile distant.

Now the farmer trotted through the lanes; then climbed by gradual stages to the Moor. On his way he met a traveller and bade him 'good morning' after his usual friendly fashion.

The wayfarer looked at him and nodded, but did not speak.

He was a tall, lean man in knickerbockers, and his strange face arrested the rider. It was bearded, and out of a small head there stared a pair of wonderful eyes. They were large and brown, and they seemed to blaze with inner fire from under a flat cloth cap which the tourist wore. His countenance was haggard, and he went slowly, with a long stride. It seemed to Snell that there was something furtive and helpless about the man. The farmer turned in his saddle and watched him. He appeared exhausted, yet kept moving and pushed steadily on.

The stranger's eyes stuck in Walter's memory, for he had never seen such a pair before.

He jogged forward, breasted a hill or two, and then sighted a neighbour's farm that lay ten miles from his own and was even more lonely. It stood in a hollow of the waste, and before the low entrance a trout stream ran, with the morning sunlight glittering upon it.

Snell's eyes were keen, and, though over a mile away, he perceived some unusual movement

about the place. Half a dozen dun-coloured figures appeared round the door, and several black-clad men moved among them. He knew John White of Brook Ford and considered whether he would join the throng, but decided to mind his own business and go his way.

"It looks parlous like as if he'd got the bailiffs in," reflected Mr. Snell, screwing his eyes to help his vision, "and nobody wouldn't be much surprised perhaps; but I hadn't heard it was come to that."

He loosed rein and galloped a mile; then walked up a bridle track and kept steadily forward for another hour, till his destination, a market town on the eastern frontiers of the great table-land, glimmered grey in the vale of a river, five miles distant.

Presently Walter fell in with other outlying men on horseback, met an acquaintance he had not seen for a year, and descended with him to the little township beneath.

Meantime the weary pedestrian with the glowing eyes had followed Walter's own route, and, soon after noon, found himself beneath Undershaw. He had seen the great woods from afar and set his course in that direction. Then he came upon the farm, wiped his forehead, made some effort to clean his muddy boots, and washed his long white hands in the rill that bubbled out of the forest and was caught in a drinking-trough at the farmyard gate.

The man showed every sign of great physical weariness, and was, indeed, sinking for food. Here, doubtless, it might be found; he knocked at the door just as Jane Snell and her family were sitting down to dinner.

The unusual incident of a visitor sent Timothy and Milly flying to their mother's apron-strings; but she scolded them, while Maggie, who feared nothing, left her bacon and potatoes and went to the door.

The tall stranger smiled at her and asked if he might see her father or mother, whereupon Jane, a deep-breasted woman of broad beam and solid substance, arose and appeared at the porch. The man had already sat down on a chair that stood there.

He spoke very courteously in a deep voice and with refined accents.

"Pray forgive me for troubling you, but I am unwell. I have lost my way and walked many miles over the moors, and I am really in great suffering for need of food. I should be exceedingly obliged if you could spare me anything —a little bread and cheese perhaps, and a drink of milk. Can you manage this?"

"Of course, sir. We be taking dinner this minute. You'm welcome, I'm sure. Will 'e come in, or have it out here?"

"How good of you! But I'm in Devonshire, thank God! Yes, I'll come in gladly, if I may. Where am I?"

He followed her, sat down beside her, and smiled at the battery of young eyes fixed on him.

Mrs. Snell helped him generously, and watched brute hunger struggle with the table habits of a man gently born. He ate fast and drank at a draught the cup of milk that Jack poured for him.

"Forgive me," he said. "I hope none of you young people will ever be so horribly hungry as I was. I've had no breakfast, and I began to

think something terrible would happen to me till I saw your beautiful home."

"A very good thing you did, sir," ventured Maggie, "for there ain't no other house for a cruel long way."

"It was a very good thing, my dear."

He ate of the bacon and potatoes and consumed part of a batter pudding; then he finished with some bread and cheese and uttered a long sigh.

"I live again," he said.

His hunger sated, he amused the children with stories, then rose and stretched himself. So tall was he that his hands touched the ceiling.

Presently the young people went off and Mrs. Snell retired to her baby and left the stranger with Anna. He was comfortable and at his ease now and showed no immediate desire to depart. He displayed a keen interest in his hostess and the establishment of the farm, and Anna, who liked talking, but rarely had an opportunity to do so, chattered and laid bare the family history after the manner of her kind. He learnt all there was to know, and complimented the widow.

"You'll be married again yourself before long, I expect," he said. And she answered frankly that she hoped it might happen.

"Us be so out of the world here," she explained, "that we seldom see a strange face, old or young."

Then he asked where the master was.

"I should like to see him and thank him for his hospitality," said the visitor.

"He'm away to Tawton fair for three days," she answered.

"And who looks after you all?"

"We look after ourselves. We ban't feared.

Thieves don't come where there's nought for 'em."

Presently Mrs. Snell returned, and the stranger declared that he must start.

"I want to go through the woods to the next village before night. I have friends there who will take me in," he declared.

"Widecombe?" she asked, and so told him what he wanted to know.

"Yes, ma'am, Widecombe."

"Maggie will show you a short cut, and if you see keeper you can say you'm a friend of Mr. Snell's," declared Jane. Then Maggie was summoned, to her delight, and presently set off.

"I can't thank you enough, and I'm not going to offer you anything but thanks," said the tall man, shaking hands heartily with Jane. "But I shan't forget Undershaw in a hurry, and I shall give myself the great pleasure of sending some little gifts to the youngsters presently."

Then he started with Maggie as guide, shortening his long steps to keep pace with her.

They soon vanished into the woods together, and Anna and her sister-in-law discussed the tall stranger when he was gone.

"Did you ever see such a funny pair of eyes?" asked the elder. "They gave me the creeps till I got used to 'em, and yet you might say they was beautiful."

"He's one of them artists, I shouldn't wonder," decided Jane. "He was a bit queer, but they be always a bit queer—unlike common folk, always on wires and look at life terrible fantastic. Must be a sad thing to be born so. But a gentleman seemingly."

Maggie led the stranger through the woods,

and, finding him very amiable, prattled with her accustomed vivacity. A quarter of a mile from the farm, amid undergrowth of laurel and rhododendron, a deserted mine adit gaped in the forest. Its mouth opened black in the gloom of a thicket and marked a long-forgotten and futile enterprise, where men had mined the hill for copper.

"That's a terrible queer old place," she told him. "A proper cave, and only brave ones will go in. Jack went in a long way once; but he got feared and soon came out again. I wouldn't go in. But us plays our games here sometimes and pretends the wicked ogre lives in there and will pop out and catch us and eat us if we don't run for dear life."

"Let's have a look at it," the tall man answered. He appeared to be interested in the tunnel. They examined it and he told her it was the ruined entrance of a mine. "I dare say all sorts of queer things live in there now," he said.

"But not the foxes," explained Maggie. "The foxes have their cubby holes far ways off on the Moor; but they come here to catch the rabbits and play about. I've see'd 'em playing sometimes; and of a night you can hear 'em barking and the owls answering them. 'Tis terrible wisht in the woods of a night, master."

They proceeded until light glinted along the summits of the trees and the crown of the hill hove up behind them.

"We'll sit and rest a minute," said the traveller, "and I'll show you something. Come and sit on my lap. You're a very pretty girl, Maggie, and I'll send you a fine present soon. What would you like—a big doll?"

He had won her completely, and she sat on his knee with his arm round her.

"I'd dearly love one of they proper, waxen dollies what open and shut their eyes. May Endicott have got one; a visitor who boarded along with her mother sent it."

"You shall have one. I won't forget; it shall come to Miss Maggie Snell, Undershaw Farm."

"Will you really?"

"Now I'll show you a pretty thing."

He fumbled in his coat and brought out an Eastern weapon—long and sharp. It was a Damascus dagger with Persian letters in gold upon the steel and a handle of old yellow ivory adorned with bosses of pink coral and green jade.

At the haft was a tiny smear of red, which the stranger rubbed off.

"My! What a grand knife!" cried Maggie.

"Isn't it? And sharp—sharp!"

He drew it very gently along her little round throat, and his great eyes burned.

"I expect people have been killed with this knife in the old days, Maggie."

"Fancy! I hope they was wicked people and not good ones," she said.

"People have got to die and go to Heaven. You'll die some day—so shall I."

"I hope you won't die afore you send me my dolly, master."

"No, no; not before that. Now I must get forward and you must show me the road to Widecombe. There's a song about Widecombe Fair, isn't there?"

"I know it!" answered the child proudly. "I'll sing it to you if you mind to hear it."

"I'd like to hear it."

So she sang 'Widecombe Fair' and he stroked her cheek and praised her heartily. They parted

presently with a kiss. She showed him his way and he set out upon it. In a moment he appeared to have forgotten the child; and, having reached the open road, his eyes surveyed the distance and the heathery undulations round about. Then, when Maggie had gone, he turned back, regained the shelter of the woods, waited, lying under a holly bush till the sun had descended beneath the hills, and then slunk into the depths of the trees again. He remembered the path, and presently, finding the tunnel of the old mine adit, entered it and crept forward into the darkness. He did not again emerge.

And while his daughter ran home to tell of her adventures, Walter Snell enjoyed the fun of the fair, met old friends, and bought some promising lambs. In the evening he was out again and wished that a child or two were with him to ride on the merry-go-rounds; then he returned to his inn and spent an hour in the public bar before retiring. Now, for the first time, he remembered the incident at Brook Ford on his morning ride; but none knew of anything to call a crowd to that lonely spot.

"You be little better'n foreigners, you chaps t'other side of Dartymoor," chaffed a man. "And yet you think us town folk must know all about your business."

Another spoke, however, who was informed.

"If you mean John White to Brook Ford, you'll never see him no more, nor yet his wife, nor yet his daughter," said a policeman in plain clothes. "A proper, hugeous tragedy. They'm all dead!"

"John White dead! Why for? I see'd the

man a month ago and never better!" cried Mr. Snell.

"He's dead because a knife was drove into his heart," answered the other. "And his poor wife was slaughtered same way, and Nelly White, tokened to a man at Postbridge, was killed also. An awful upstore! And we ain't at the end of it yet, I expect."

"God's goodness!" gasped Mr. Snell. "That's what all they people was there for, then! He lies nine or ten miles up over from my place, and I see'd the crowd as I passed by. Did he kill hisself?"

"Not him. It's murder, and us knows the criminal; and 'tis feared as he'll do in a few more afore he's taken."

The bar hummed.

"White never had an enemy in his life but himself," said Mr. Snell. "I've knowed the man years and years, and a peacefuller creature don't walk. His only fault be whisky, and that but off and on."

"'Twas a raging madman done it," explained the policeman. "'Tis like this. A maniac's got out of the asylum to Newton and cleared for the Moor. He was away last night; but firstly he'd gone into the head doctor's room, where there was a lot of curiosities under glass, and he took a steel knife of great value with him. 'Twasn't known he'd gone much before nightfall; but the dark came down and no sight of him. And this morning the cowman, taking in the milk at Brook Ford, found the house locked and couldn't get nobody to come when he shouted. Then he see a back window broke and went in, and found the master dead in the hall, and his wife

the same up over, and the poor girl stabbed in her bed. The man's a gentleman what done it—a very civil-spoken, long-legged chap. He killed two people before he was put away a year ago, and one was his own brother. 'Tis thought he's harbouring in the woods at Dartmeet, for a boy said he'd seen a tall bearded chap going along fast that way, but——"

Walter Snell interrupted. He had grown very pale, and his words throttled each other.

"A bearded man—tall—and—and——? How was he dressed? Do they know?"

"In tweeds and knickers and a flat cloth cap, so the telegram says. The constabulary's out all round. No money, but a watch and——"

"God's light! I met him not four mile from Undershaw this morning, and he was going that way!" cried Walter Snell.

"Then you'd better get back, neighbour," urged the innkeeper, "so quick as your hoss will take you."

The policeman was concerned.

"How far is it?" he asked. "Them that know say, if he ain't taken, he's dead sure to kill again to-night. He's strong and awful cunning—what's called homicidal. He can't help it, of course, poor wretch. The folk are being warned all round about. Be your hoss good to take you home?"

Mr. Snell was girding himself for a struggle.

"My hoss is slow and sure. I must have something quicker. 'Tis twenty mile. Is there any man here as can lend me a hunter, or a hoss that can gallop?"

A young farmer, who had listened to this conversation, jumped up.

"Yes," he said. "I've got a valuable mare if you can ride."

"I can ride anything. I'll take proper care of her."

"She's only five minutes away—half a hunter. Her'll do all you want if you don't use a whip."

They buzzed round Walter, and the policeman asked if it were possible to telegraph, but Snell said: "No. We'm far ways off in the heart of the hill and no telegraph for ten miles. 'Tis twenty mile I've got to go and now 'tis past ten o'clock; but I'll get there round midnight, or near it. I know the road—all pretty good going."

They spoke words of encouragement.

"Be sure you only met some harmless chap," said the innkeeper. "All the same 'tis your duty to get home as fast as you can. I hope to God you'll hear this madman's catched. Then us shall see you back presently."

"My house be full of women and childer," explained Walter Snell, "and if he was to get in among 'em—— There, I mustn't think of it. Here's the hoss."

"You'm inside the law to shoot him dead to save life," explained the policeman. "Have 'e got a gun?"

"Yes, yes—I've got a gun. I ban't feared—if I only get there in time."

The horse destined to carry Snell on that famous ride was trotted up by the owner, and Walter found words to thank him. "Trust me. If any ill befalls, I'll make all good," he promised.

The men tumbled out of the bar to see the start, and the policeman promised that at the earliest moment possible the law should hasten to the farmer's protection.

"Thank God 'tis brave moonlight and the poor chap will see his way," said an old man; and presently the subject shifted to the recent tragedy, for none knew of what happened that day at Undershaw, or entertained any suspicion of the awful danger that threatened it.

Happily, Walter Snell himself was as ignorant as the rest. He suffered sufficiently notwithstanding. He understood horses, however, kept his nerve, rode a big black mare with restraint, and only pushed her hard when the last five miles remained to ride. The night was crystal clear and still. Two policemen challenged Walter on the high Moor, and he pulled up for half a minute to explain his purpose. The man, they said, had not been caught; and when Walter told them that he had probably seen him early in the day they felt doubtful. The hue-and-cry had taken another direction and it was thought that the maniac harboured near Two Bridges beside Dart. The police were mounted, and, bidding Mr. Snell not loose rein, followed him.

At last he was in his own familiar country and galloping along a level lane a mile from his home. Already ahead he could see the black masses of the woods, and soon marked the peaceful face of the farmhouse, grey under the moon.

He had come faster than he hoped, for it was still short of midnight. Unspeakable peace brooded over the deep coomb, and it seemed impossible that any evil thing could have fallen here.

An hour earlier, the bearded man had crept from his hiding-place, and the long, lean shape of him, lusting for lives that lay beneath, slipped through the shadowed woods.

He stole from tree to tree, avoided the clearings

where the silver light rained down, and stood silent, sometimes listening intently for a footfall. He descended—a tiger, with a poisoned human brain to guide the beast of prey. He had noted Undershaw closely while at his meal in the kitchen, and he purposed entering by a window that opened upon the back side of the dwelling. From the house-place a flight of stairs ascended to the rooms above.

He stood at the edge of the woods before eleven o'clock and marked the farm below. Every light was out, and he knew that the women and children were asleep. Once he thought he heard a dog baying the moon, and muttered to himself; but the sound came from behind him and was far distant. He descended by the forest hedge until only a meadow separated him from the orchard trees that girdled the farm. Then he passed out into the moonlight and stole across the dewy grass. The moonlight flashed in his eyes, and mania horribly transfigured his mournful face.

An hour later Walter Snell woke the echoes and banished silence. Fifty yards from the farm gate he lifted his voice and roared: "Jane! Jane! Jonas! Anna!"

He clattered up still shouting, and leapt from his horse. The great creature stretched her legs and stood panting, while her dripping coat gleamed in the moonlight. A moment afterwards the farmer thundered at his door and shouted until echoes from barn and byre raised a din that reverberated to the woods above. A cock crowed from his hidden perch, and another answered him. Then Walter's own bedroom window opened above his head and somebody looked out.

It was Jane Snell, and he saw his wife's massive form and round face white in the moonshine.

"God's goodness!" she cried. "Is that you, Walter?"

"Be all well? Be all well? Speak, woman!"

"Why not? Of course all be well. What should be ill?"

"The childer?"

"Man alive, what's happened? Have 'e gone mad?"

"Come down house and let me in," he said, and when Jane descended she found Walter upon his knees outside the door thanking his Maker.

"The watching Lord—the watching Lord! Us must worship Him better from this day, Jane," he grunted.

"Us worship Him all right, my dear soul, and always have, I should think. Be you drunk, or what is it? You've given me the shock of my life. A nursing mother didn't ought to be treat like this, Walter."

"You'll thank God on your knees, same as me, that you wasn't treated no worse in a minute," he answered, rising to his feet. "Wake Jonas, and tell him to go out to the mare I've rode home. Twenty miles—a grand mare! The goodness of people be past belief. I must see all the childer—every blessed one of 'em. They don't go out of my sight till morning—nor yet you, nor Anna. There's a man-killing lunatic broke loose, and he's down this way somewhere, for I saw him with my own eyes; and last night he slew John White and his wife and daughter."

Jane gasped and lumbered upstairs. A child or two had already wakened at the noise, and

Timothy, who slept in an attic next to old Jonas Blake, was heard to cry. In two minutes Walter had embraced them all. Then Blake drew on his trousers and went out to the mare, while the family, with Anna, assembled in the house-place.

The smouldering fire of peat was roused and the lamp lighted.

Walter demanded food, ate and drank, and told his story guardedly, not to frighten the children. But indeed all save Maggie and Jack were soon asleep again, with childhood's unquestioned acceptance of wonders. Blankets and pillows were brought from above, and there they slumbered, while their father brought his gun down from its place over the mantelshelf and loaded both barrels.

They had much to tell him too, and even Maggie lost her courage and grew very white and fearful when she heard.

"If it don't make you the best girl in Dartmoor, it did ought," said her mother.

Jonas presently returned, having rubbed down and fed the precious steed and locked her up; then the tale was told again just as the mounted police arrived.

They stopped an hour, baited their horses, heard all there was to hear from Mrs. Snell and Maggie, and, at the first glimmer of day, ascended into the wood; but it was not they who told the end of the story.

Jonas had been prowling round the house at dawn and ran back before five o'clock. He was rheumatic and hopped like a lame bird. His eyes were goggling and his head shaking when he appeared, just as Anna had brewed some tea and cut a pile of bread and butter. At daylight

Walter had fallen asleep in his chair, with his gun on his knees, but Jonas waked him and screamed to him to come out of doors.

"All's ended! 'Tis done, and we be saved alive!" piped the ancient man. "Come up over for the Lord's sake. The wretch be paid in his own bloody coin. He's a goner!"

Walter hastened through the orchard, to see an object like a fallen scarecrow lying twisted and grotesquely distorted twenty yards from the hedge.

"'Tis him — the loony," explained Jonas. "And that's 'Bold Turk's' work last night. You can see how 'twas. He came slipping down like a snake over the grass when us was all dead to sleep. But little the monster knew what was waiting for him. I've always said 'Bold Turk' be death by night to anything alive."

They entered the field fearlessly enough, and stood for a moment over a mangled and broken corpse that scarcely held together. And ten yards away, sticking upright in the turf, was a knife with an ivory handle.

A low bellow, half guttural, half shrill, sounded close at hand, and 'Bold Turk' ambled amiably up to his master. He was a white bull, with short stubby horns, and mighty head and chest. His knees were stained red.

"He'm God's good beast, Jonas," said Mr. Snell, stroking the huge brute's nose with a shaky hand. "Never do I part with him—not for his weight in gold and diamonds. Get a hurdle, will 'e, and a sack or two."

IV

THE MASTERPIECE

THE CLIMAX of Gaffer Haycraft's life was at hand; and it might reasonably be a great one, since every dog has his day, and this little dog waited seventy years for his.

Mr. Haycraft had hammered granite for more than half a century, and two generations regarded his familiar round shoulders, crabbed face, thin beard, and bald head as a common object of Belstone. He was very small, and round in the back as a beetle. Folk held him as enduring, necessary, and devoid of interest as the village pump. And now Aaron had nearly reached the end of his tether, and his hands, long since calloused into mere pincers by the needs of his business, would soon wield mallet and chisel no more.

He had done nothing in his life to win enthusiasm. An old bachelor, he dwelt with a widowed sister five years older than himself. He was known to be short in his temper and strongly averse from going to any place of worship; but he possessed no further qualities that a medusa or polyp might not have shared with him. He professed no opinions, and possessed no information, no friends, and no enemies. He was regarded merely as the motive

power behind a stone chisel. He had in his time splintered countless tons of granite from the bowels of Dartmoor; and he had squared hundreds of yards of it. During his monotonous existence he had consumed large quantities of solid food and had drunk many barrels of beer. But he had not fallen in love nor felt his heart ache at loss; he had neither heaved a sigh nor shed a tear since he grew out of childhood. His life might be summed up in negatives. He had never taken a holiday, nor enjoyed a bit of sport, nor offered any man a drink, nor any child a penny.

And now upon this colourless career there dawned an event.

In his youth the ancient had worked for one Roger Arscott at Belstone quarries, where men burrowed into Dartmoor for its bones, and left a gaping grey scar against the harmonious colours of the hill. There Aaron Haycraft toiled, wrestled with the stone, and to perfection managed that method of working it known as the 'feather and tear.' The old man would make a row of little holes with his 'jumper,' then insert wedges of steel, and anon, with judicious tapping, split the stubborn matter almost as truly as though it had been sawed. Granite, indeed, he held to be a good-natured stone in the hands of those who understood it.

When he was sixty, Mr. Haycraft found himself working for his first master's son, one William Arscott; and as the labourer had now reached ripe age, and felt the steep climb from the village to the quarry, he changed his toil, and henceforth occupied himself in the sheds beside the village green. Hither the granite

came in rough masses from the Moor and was fashioned to its purpose. A clinking and chiming of steel on stone is the immemorial music of the village, and, with brief cessation at noon, it continues from dawn until dusk of every working day.

Like a smudge, the low sheds smear the edge of Belstone green. Around them extends a carpet of granite dust and splinters, upon which giant blocks stand or lie and take gradual shape under the eternal tinkle of the chisels.

For three years Aaron Haycraft had been engaged upon one single task, and now a majestic monument of his industry approached completion. In the midst of the debris of the yard, trussed upon timbers, stood a mighty granite trough wrought from a single mass. No flaw marked the monster. It was perfect in length, breadth, depth, and thickness. It would endure for ever, and stand a monument to the pigmy workman long after he was dust. The gaffer's hand alone had struck it.

From a day when six steaming horses dragged this huge block down into the village, it had passed into Mr. Haycraft's keeping. Every measurement had been made by him, every tap of the chisel was his work. No such achievement had ever left Belstone, and the natives were proud of it, and regretted that ere long the trough, now a familiar feature of the village, must soon pass from amongst them to its destination in the neighbouring town of Okehampton.

The masterpiece was to be set up for a memorial to Squire Luscombe's lady, and the time had nearly come for its departure.

Mr. Haycraft lacked imagination, and he struck

his last blow with as little emotion as he had taken his first measurement; then he turned to various minor accessories of the great trough. Massive struts of moor-stone were required to support it, while beneath would stand another minor tank within the reach of thirsty sheep and dogs. For Squire Luscombe's lady had been a great friend of all dumb things, and her husband, after long casting about as to what manner of memorial might best commemorate his wife's humanity and other high qualities, had thought upon a fountain in the principal street of her birthplace.

Idlers assembled round old Haycraft as he approached his journey's end, and he believed that a certain attention, and even deference, were the result of this great task. The circumstance puffed him up. From a mien neither modest nor assertive, but independent and indifferent, the ancient man began to hold his head somewhat high. He suddenly discovered that fifty years with granite had taught him facts concerning that stone not universally familiar. He grew proud of his knowledge; then he became jealous of it; presently he snapped and quarrelled if any man presumed to differ from him, or dogmatise concerning the subject in his presence.

He sat one day on the edge of his trough in the dinner-hour, and ate from a pudding-basin the meal his sister had provided. A new resident at Belstone passed on his way to the Hearty Welcome with a jug. The stranger desired to please everybody, so he stopped and nodded respectfully to the trough.

"As wonnerful a masterpiece as ever I see'd or heard tell about," he said reverently.

"'Tis allowed to be rather above the common, I believe," answered Aaron, dipping into his basin. "Squire Luscombe was up here hisself last week. Let's see, what did he say to me, Matthew Pearn?"

Matthew Pearn was Haycraft's junior by five years, and a rival. He also had a round back and a pinched face, a head inclined to be bald, and a pudding-basin to hold his dinner. But he had no famous trough to sit upon: only a sack in an empty cart.

"Squire said as how 'twas time, and more than time, that thicky bit o' work was out of hand," answered Matthew; whereupon Mr. Haycraft laughed ill-naturedly.

"Ah, some of us be jealous, you see. Squire, he stood mazed with wonder. He said 'twas a living record for a bit of granite, an' shook me by the hand. An' the chap as says he didn't be a liar."

The new-comer desired friendship with everybody.

"A very butivul contrivance, an' a great boon to the children an' to overdriven cattle, an' a blessing to hosses; an' you'm a most skilful old man, for sartain," he declared.

"So they seem to think," said Mr. Haycraft.

"An' 'twould make a very handsome coffin for a gentleman of quality," continued the new-comer. "I've seen the like up to Exeter museum —so old as Adam very nearly."

"No doubt—only too costly for carpses," answered Aaron.

"So it would be; but all the same, a man with a fancy for it, as didn't mind spending a round penny, might order one in good time."

The stranger departed; and Mr. Arscott himself appeared from the door of his dwelling on the opposite side of Belstone green, and walked over into the works.

"Go on eating," he said. "No call to stop. I've heard from Squire Luscombe, that's all; and he says the trough be going to be handed over to the Okehampton authorities the week after Christmas. 'Tis fixed, and the Member of Parliament, Sir Rupert Fogwell, M.P., have promised to do the ceremony. So you've got to get finished in a fortnight from to-day, Aaron. An' if you can't, Matthew must help."

Mr. Arscott was aware that this suggestion would quicken the ancient's chisel. Aaron's lips worked, and his eyes bulged. Then he swallowed and made reply.

"Shall be done. 'Twill take two days to get it all down there, an' maybe three or four to set it up."

"Right. There'll be a bit of a speech an' so on. I'm going to be there, of course, an' all you chaps will have a holiday; and you, as the man that did the job, must go, and anybody else that has a mind to."

Aaron's mouth worked until the lower part of his face shook, and he showed evidence of great uneasiness.

"Me go?" he asked. "Why for should I?"

"You'll be the hero of the day," answered his master, grinning at the old man's tremor.

"Dallybuttons! To stand up afore company?"

"Why not? You ban't ashamed of the trough, I should hope?"

William Arscott's sense of humour was faulty, and a jest for him usually meant discomfort for

another. He played upon the gaffer's simple understanding.

"So like as not they'll expect a speech from 'e. In fact, I've promised 'em as you'll say a word or two. 'Tis your duty. There's going to be a free lunch in the Town Hall after, an' they'll be sure to drink your health; so mind you come prepared."

"I'll go to a free lunch with any man," answered Mr. Haycraft firmly; "but to speak afore company at my time of life! No, no; they may drink my health till they'm so drunk as wasps, but not a word will I say."

"'Twill be demanded from you."

Mr. Haycraft got up in a fret and fume. His head shook, his appetite deserted him, and he flung away the remains of his dinner to some grey speckled fowls that were waiting to receive scraps.

From that day the stonecutter was changed, and the prospect of publicity weighed very heavily upon him. Mrs. Maine, his sister, suffered, for he was a tyrant at best within the walls of his home, and now the situation rendered him intolerable. After a week had passed, however, he became a little accustomed to the thought, and then his alarm was modified into an uneasy complacency.

William Arscott quickly forgot his joke, but Aaron Haycraft did not forget it. As the day grew nearer, he grew exceedingly irritable again. He pretended absolute indifference, but while now he would not have forgone the ordeal for any consideration, none the less he earnestly wished that it was over.

There fell a night when Mrs. Maine woke with

toothache and went to the kitchen for brandy. Then, to her astonishment, she heard a voice upon the silence, and discovered that Aaron was talking aloud. She crept to his chamber door, pulled the flannel down from her swollen face, released her ear, and listened. She started with deep astonishment, for Mr. Haycraft rehearsed a speech.

Three days later the old man took a half-holiday and went down to Okehampton alone. His work was done, and he explained that he desired to see the site that his trough was destined to adorn. Matthew Pearn, Ben Pierce, Joshua Bloom, and other labourers discussed the event and advanced theories concerning it.

"He goeth about so full of business," said Pierce, a sandy youth with a chest like Hercules.

"Here, there, an' everywhere, poor old gawkim, same as a dried pea in a baccy box," declared Mr. Bloom. He was a man with moist eyes, like a cow's, and a mournful mouth.

"Silly mumphead!" growled Matthew Pearn. "He'd believe anything now. 'Tis master's fault. He was laughing at the old fool all the time."

"His bit of success have turned his poor head," said Pierce.

"'Tis a common thing with the boys to hold their noses up in the air for nought," answered Joshua Bloom; "but for an old, aged chap up seventy year—why, he did ought to be past such silly pride."

"An' him a man as only misses being soft in his head by the thickness of my thumb-nail," mused Matthew Pearn.

Meantime Aaron marched down into Oke-

hampton and visited the site of the drinking-fountain. Half a dozen labourers were at work there, and Mr. Haycraft made himself known to them.

"You may be surprised to hear it, souls, but I'm the man as made thicky trough," he said, and smiled and nodded at them.

A tall youngster with long brown arms looked up from his work in the road, dropped his pick, tightened his belt, and pulled a pipe out of his pocket.

"Well, old chap, us'll take your word for it without any fuss. And I be the man that have dug this here hole, an' you never see a hole dug better, I'll swear."

Mr. Haycraft scowled.

"You'm a saucy young toad!" he said, "an' when you know half so much about granite as what I do——"

"Ah, you Belstone men!" interrupted another labourer. "Be blessed if you don't think you'm made of better mud than valley folk! Never knowed a lot of twopenny-halfpenny people set such value on themselves. For that matter, us have got a man or two to Okehampton, I believe, as can cut granite. Go an' look at the cattle-market, my old dear."

Aaron hastened off, but not to study the beauties of the cattle-market. He put a street between his person and the site of the drinking-trough, uttered coarse expressions to himself, and then, growing cooler, went into a cheap outfitter's. Here he bought a new suit of clothes for eighteen shillings. The cloth was a light mustard-yellow dotted with black. He also purchased a linen collar, a linen shirt-front, and

a green tie with red stars on it. He desired to buy a new hat, but the price frightened him.

"Us shan't have our hats on at the feast, so 'tis no odds," he reflected.

The great day came, and the great man, with many others, set off from Belstone and trudged through rain and mud to the scene of the ceremony. At the very last moment Mrs. Maine declined to join her brother. She had wakened with heart-flutterings and declared that the spectacle of Aaron addressing gentle-people in a public place was more than she could endure without being ill. He was much annoyed, but his sister remained firm.

A crowd had already collected round the drinking-fountain. It was hidden from view by tarpaulins; around it assembled a couple of hundred holiday folk; and behind it stood a wooden platform, raised two feet out of the mud and covered with red cloth. Mr. Haycraft was about to ascend the daïs when a policeman seized the tail of his new coat and pulled him back.

"That ban't your place, uncle," he said.

"Who be you touching?" cried the old man. "I made the damn trough! If I shouldn't stand here, who should?"

"Where's your ticket, then?"

But Aaron had no ticket.

Some men in the front of the throng took compassion upon him and let him stand before them, for his small person interrupted no view.

"'Twill be all right," he explained, "so soon as I catch my master's eye. 'Twas I that made the trough. None smote the stone but me. Here cometh Arscott with the quality!"

The ancient relapsed into silence, and his jaws worked tremulously. He was rehearsing his speech. Then, through the rain, a dozen people mounted the platform, and Sir Rupert Fogwell, being a politician very sensitive to damp, lost no time in performing his task and dragging the tarpaulins off the memorial.

"We'll do the talking after luncheon, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "because you'll all agree with me that this is no place for wise folk to-day."

The knight spoke for exactly one minute and a half, but Aaron Haycraft heard not a word. He was making wild efforts to attract his master; yet even when Mr. Arscott's eye fell upon the little man he appeared not to know him.

Losing his temper at this indignity, the gaffer made a sudden dash for the platform, and this time the policeman, discharging a public duty under the public eye, picked up Aaron like a naughty boy, and carried him to the back of the crowd.

At the same moment the tarpaulins were dragged off the drinking-fountain, a button was pressed, and water began to bubble into the trough.

"As fine a piece of Dartmoor granite as I have ever seen," declared the Member of Parliament. "And a very great credit to Mr. William Arscott, who cut it at his works, I understand. It has taken some years to complete, and will preserve the memory of a saintly woman for many generations to come. Now what I've got to say on subjects of general interest to Okehampton you shall hear in the Town Hall, if you'll honour me with your attention there presently."

Sir Rupert put up his umbrella; those about him did likewise. Half a dozen closed carriages and broughams drove up; the company departed, and in five minutes the drinking-trough stood alone, while harsh storms of rain swept the street and the gurgling water poured on. Behind a crowd of noisy people, dazed, bewildered, and alone, walked Mr. Haycraft.

But he entered the Town Hall with the rest, and once more struggled to win some prominence. A cross-table ran at the top of the room at right angles to three others; but, since he possessed a blue ticket only, and not a red one, Aaron had again to take the lower place. The old man was turned away by a stout young waiter, who said a rude thing about his necktie.

In a fury he hastened to the other end of the room; then, pushed and hustled and chaffed, he at last found himself near the bottom of one of the long tables. On one side of him sat an aged deaf woman with a 'port-wine' mark all over her face; on the other, one of the town dustmen, who had not found leisure to doff his working clothes.

These people were come to eat, but the food choked Aaron. He fell back upon beer to fortify his tormented spirit; and he presently rose into a strenuous frame of mind that was not prepared to take further denial. His great wrongs burned in him, and he turned to the dustman.

"I ought to be up there along wi' the highest of 'em," he said. "'Tis shameful injustice that I be shot down here as if I was nobody."

"Better fill your belly an' not waste time talking," answered the other. "They'll begin

speechifying presently, then us shall have to bide quiet."

Mr. Haycraft spoke to the neighbour on his right hand.

"I cut that trough—every stroke," he said; "an' yet I be down here alongside you, an' of no more account than the least among us."

"Tell a bit louder, mister," she answered. "I'm a thought hard of hearing 'pon your side."

Presently the speeches began, and Aaron Haycraft, now dead to reason, was suddenly seized with a great inspiration.

"Blast 'em! They *shall* know as I made the trough," he said.

Upon this determination the old man rose up. It happened that Squire Luscombe himself was speaking at the time, and detailing, not without emotion, the nature of his late partner's ceaseless efforts for humanity and for the humbler creation. Then—penetrating, shrill, and sudden as the 'baa' of a sheep—there came another voice. Mr. Haycraft stood upon his short legs and swayed hither and thither. His eyes rolled; his face glistened with perspiration.

"Ladies an' gentlemen, they be treating me—— 'Twas I, with these hands—I will tell 'em—I—let me go, you dog! The trough—Death take you ——!"

By this time two waiters had dragged the gaffer to the door. He was hustled away amid shouts of 'Shame!' 'Turn him out!' 'Drunken old swine!' Then the ruffled squire proceeded.

Aaron stood for a few minutes in the rain. First he shook his fist at the Town Hall; then he swore; then he began to cry. He wept for some time, and wandered back to the trough.

A ray of sunlight glittered on the granite, and a dozen people stood and watched the fountain run. Aaron set his back against the memorial, steadied himself, and addressed the spectators.

"They devils have turned me out of the feast, souls!" he cried. "Me—me that made this trough with these hands."

"You didn't ought to have took so much drink, old chap," said a postman.

"Drink—drink—who wouldn't drink? Not a word said about me. An' new clothes for it an' everything. And God's my judge, I made the trough with these hands."

A railway porter laughed.

"Well, some fool had to make it," he said.

Mr. Haycraft stared at the grinning faces. Then he turned suddenly to the trough, pulled a face at it, and spat into it with all his mouth.

"That for you—beast!" he cried.

"Go home, you nasty old man!" exclaimed a woman in a Salvation Army bonnet. "Get home and fall on your knees, and ask the Lord to touch your heart afore the grave opens for you."

Aaron glared round him; then he set off unsteadily up the hill homeward.

Once out of the town, he sat down on a wayside seat and reflected upon the ways of the world. He then discovered that he was drunk, and presently he nodded, and his hat rolled off.

An hour later, Matthew Pearn, Joshua Bloom, Ben Pierce and others, returning to Belstone in a cart, and singing as they went, found their companion, and they picked him up and cleaned some of the mud off him, and took him home to his sister.

V

THE ROPE

'TIS OF A KINDLY and a creepy chap by the name of Gregory Merdle that I be going to tell; and first we see the man at the end of a long journey, dog-tired and very near ready for bed. Travelling was travelling in his days, and Gregory Merdle's eyes began to blink, for the coach journey from Bristol to Exeter had taken a good many hours, and 'twas winter weather, and a good fire and a good supper had made him terrible sleepy. But his day wasn't done yet by no means.

The remains of supper lay on the table of the room that he had engaged; his bed was in the corner and his box stood beside it. A brave fire burned, and Mr. Merdle, who had took off his shoes, stretched out a pair of big feet to the blaze, puffed a 'churchwarden,' and stared at a kettle which hummed upon the hob. He was a huge-built chap, fifty year old or thereabout, with a massive neck, a bullet head, a flat nose, and a clean-shaved face, whereof the chin was the mightiest member. A fighting head, you might have called it, and, indeed, Gregory in his younger days had shone in the ring, and taken his place as victor and vanquished in fourteen

fights to a finish. But Mr. Belcher settled Merdle's claims in the P.R., and left the mark of a champion of England's genius on his mug in the shape of a broken nose. Yet the old prize-fighter's look was kindly; his eyes twinkled, and his mouth, though mighty large, was easy and framed for laughter as well as victuals.

"I'll have my nightcap and get to bed, ma'am," he said to Jane Hatch, the landlady, who entered to remove his supper tray. "I'm that sleepy, along with my cold journey on the coach, that 'tis all I can do to keep awake, Mrs. Hatch."

She regarded the giant with reverent fear, and her eyes was round when she looked upon him.

"Yes, Mr. Merdle, sir; no doubt you be in the right, sir. When do it happen, if I may ax?"

"Eleven o'clock, on Heavitree Hill, ma'am. And I take the Plymouth coach at half after three in the afternoon, and hope to get down there afore midnight."

"Yes, Mr. Merdle, sir. All Exeter will be there to see."

"No doubt the people will be there as you say. I fetch out bigger crowds than the players or the parsons—more shame to human nature. And when 'tis over, I shall just come back-along here to pick a bone, and later I'll carry my box to the coach."

"What will I get you for breakfast, Mr. Merdle, sir?" she asked.

"For breakfast I'll have a pound of sausages and a pint of beer, Mrs. Hatch. Let 'em be served sharp at seven. I must get up the hill betimes to see as everything is in order."

"Us have got a nice lot of black-pudden going

just now," ventured the woman, and he considered a bit afore he answered:

"There's nothing on this side the grave my wife do love better'n black-pudden. If you can sell me a couple of pound, I'll take 'em back home to Bristol with me next week."

"So I will, then, Mr. Merdle, sir," she said. "Two pound and a bit over you shall have."

"Good-night, then. Breakfast at seven sharp, mind. I shall be ready for it. And take my shoes and give 'em a clean."

"Yes, Mr. Merdle, sir."

With that the landlady departed. Of course, she was itching to talk a little more concerning the big man's business; but she dared not, for he weren't one as you could dare to question against his will.

Then Mr. Merdle poured out his nightcap of 'four fingers,' squeezed in half a lemon, added sugar, filled up with boiling water, and set the grog to keep hot by the fire. He finished his pipe, flung it in the fender, and filled and lit another, which he took from a box on the chest of drawers. He puffed and breathed heavily, sipped his drink, and spread his enormous hands to the fire.

A church clock struck ten, and then the silence of the little alley off Cathedral Yard was broken. The visitor heard a knock at the street door below and two women's voices.

"I must see him—the gentleman that come by the coach!" cried one.

"You can't; he's gone to bed, my dear woman," answered Jane Hatch.

"No matter for that; he can get up again. 'Twill pay him well to do so," said the first. "See him I will!"

"Be that a babby you've got there?" asked the landlady.

"Yes, 'tis, then—wi' king's evil, poor little chap!" And that threw a bit of light on the matter for Mrs. Hatch.

"I see. Well, he's a terrible kind gentleman. I dare say as he'll let you come up if he ban't asleep a'ready. I know he strikes for it," she answered.

"Life or death may hang upon the man, and if you're a mother, you'll understand," declared the first, while Jane granted as much.

"Life or death be in his hand, no doubt," admitted Mrs. Hatch. And a moment later she ran upstairs and knocked at her lodger's door. He bade her enter.

"Please, Mr. Merdle, sir——" she began; but the visitor stopped her.

"I heard," he said. "You can send the creature up. I know what she wants."

A moment later a woman bustled in and shut the door behind her. She was a handsome girl of twenty, wi' a strong and resolute face, black hair, and black eyes. But she was very pale, and evidently suffered from great trouble of mind. She looked like one who had been through all sorts of torments, and had pretty well reached the end of her strength and her self-control. It was certain that the sight of Mr. Merdle caused her to feel terrible queer. In fact, for half a minute she stared at him without speaking; and then it seemed that a sudden fit of faintness overcame her, for she put her free hand to her forehead and sank down all of a sudden. Luckily, the bed was behind her, and she sat upon it.

"Take care of the warming-pan, ma'am!" said Mr. Merdle. "'Tis your child you be come about, no doubt? The usual thing, I suppose. I strike for it—the king's evil—but I always tell them as want it done that I don't promise a cure. 'Tis a mystery, and I can't tell how it works."

"I've known more than one little child cured by it," she answered him, "and I've got a golden sovereign for 'e, sir. 'Tis all I can afford, and I hope you'll let that serve."

Well, Gregory Merdle was a good bit surprised at the extent of the sum, for five shillings represented his usual charge, and twenty shillings ran quite out of the common.

"That's good," he said. "You don't seem very peart yourself, by the look of you. But I'll mix a pinch of spirits for 'e. Better still, have a pull at mine. You're a fine girl seemingly, and 'tis a pity your babby's sick."

She laid her child on Mr. Merdle's bed without waking it. Then she brought a piece of paper from her pocket, opened it, and fetched out a sovereign.

"Take it and welcome," she bade him. "I hope you'll do my little boy good, and, be it as it will, you can't do him no harm, can you?"

"Certainly not," declared Mr. Merdle, putting the sovereign in his pocket. "The world be full of things beyond our human knowledge, and if the wisdom of men has decreed that striking, or stroking, a babby with a hangman's rope is like to cure it of its ills, then who be I to say it don't? Sip at this here."

He handed her his glass, and she drank eagerly, swallowed a few mouthfuls, and then coughed. Mr. Merdle had turned his back and

gone to the box by the bed. He laughed at her discomfort.

"A bit strong for a young woman! But it won't hurt 'e. And who might your husband be, now?"

To this question she did not reply, but suddenly burst out on what looked to be quite another matter.

"This here chap, Tom West, as you be going to choke to-morrow morn — he's innocent as that babby there! Afore Heaven he's innocent, Mister Hangman!"

The public executioner had knelt down beside his box, taken a key from his pocket, and opened the little wooden trunk. In it were black clothes, a tight-fitting black cap, a mask, and a rope. The last he brought out now and flung down upon the table. It seemed to twine and coil like a serpent, and the woman shivered and stared at it as though, snake-like, the hemp had bewitched her.

She just stared and gasped and said nought.

"Feel it," said the man. "'Tis more like silk than hemp—my own twining—a merciful thing—for I be a most merciful creature, and don't give one pang more than Nature asks for. I'll use no rope but what I spin myself—I'll trust none but mine. Feel it; it almost melts in your hand, you might say."

Gregory was terrible proud of his ropes, you see, but, after her first shock, the visitor didn't seem to take much account of it.

"He's innocent," she said again, "and Heaven knows it. There's a man in Exeter this minute that bore false witness; everybody but the judge and jury was positive of it. Tom West no more stole they sheep than you did."

Mr. Merdle shrugged his shoulders.

"I ban't called upon to meddle with that," he answered. "The Law in its might have tried him all in order, and found him guilty, ma'am. My part be only to carry out the sentence of the Law. The man's life's in Higher Hands. Be it likely that Heaven would let the innocent perish? I don't believe it. And sure I am—so sure as Heaven be all justice—that I never yet turned off an innocent creature, male or female, and never shall."

The woman was thinking her private thoughts, and did not answer for a good minute.

"I know his wife," she said. "Mrs. West will die if they put him away. However, as you tell me, it ban't your business to trouble about that."

"'Tis my merciful part to end a doomed life so swift and quick as can be," he told her, "and that string there will do it. Ten souls it have sent to their Heavenly Judge in an instant moment, and if so be as they could have come back to testify, I doubt not that one and all would have sworn 'twas no more than sneezing."

She picked up the rope and examined it. Her fingers shook a good bit while she done this; but she ran the string through them, and noted how suent[1] and pliable it was.

"'Twould cling terrible close," she whispered.

"So it would, ma'am," he said, "and so it do. The knot runs like this, and I tie it inside twelve seconds. Then the man's opening his eyes in eternity afore you can say Amen!"

"You never make a mistake nor bungle it, sir?" she asked.

"Never," answered the hangman. "When

[1] *Suent*—soft.

I feel my nerve be like to fail me, then I shall go into a different walk of life and give it up. 'Tis bleak work; but it have got to be done, and so 'tis well to have a superior sort of man, as can do it masterly and swift and merciful. That's what I always say, and none deny me."

She nodded and held up the rope.

"You wouldn't let me take this away for my little one? 'Tis very well to strike it; but there's a stronger charm than that—for the child to wear the rope till the ill leaves him."

"No, no, I can't part with the rope," he told her. "I want it to-morrow to Plymouth, and the next day down to Bodmin. I have others so good as this up home to Bristol, but not here. If I stroke the child's body all over, 'tis all that need be done. So I'd best set about it."

Just then the babby on the bed yawned and stretched, and Gregory Merdle, who had two grandchilder of his own and liked them very well, turned to the little thing, held out his finger, and stroked its cheek. The child, waking happily, laughed at him. Then he picked it up, and was well pleased to find hisself treated in such a friendly spirit. To the fire he took him, and opened the blanket and took off the infant's wraps so tender as need be.

"Why, there's nought the matter with your boy, ma'am!" he cried out the next minute. "The toad's as clean and pink as a fresh shrimp! There ain't a blemish on him—a fine, fat rascal! And don't he take to me!"

"Dad—dad—dad—dad!" cried the babby, little thinking, poor fool, that this very man was going to put his father out o' life in twelve hours' time.

"Go along with you! You don't want no hangman's rope, you brave chap!" says Mr. Merdle, rubbing his great chin against the child's cheek.

Then he turned his head to look at the mother, and ax her what the mischief she'd come for to waste her money and his time.

But she had vanished. In a word, Sarah, the wife of Tom West, the condemned man, was clean gone; and she had taken the hangman's rope along with her—and left her baby!

Mr. Merdle saw his fix in a moment, and dropped the infant on his bed and hurried to the door.

"Stop that woman!" he bawled, in a voice that shook the little house; and upon his bellow Mrs. Hatch, she rushed up from below. But she was too late: the front door hung wide, and the visitor had sped away into the night.

Feared out of his little life by so much noise and disturbance, the sheepstealer's babby set up a string of shrieks; but his mother never heard 'em, for she was already out of earshot.

"She's fled, Mr. Merdle, sir!" gasped out Jane Hatch. "And, good powers, what be that? Have she left her little one?"

"Pick the nipper up and quiet him, and fetch me my shoon this instant moment," ordered Mr. Merdle. "This be a very serious matter—and more so than it looks, ma'am; for without that rope I can't hang Tom West to-morrow. My other ropes are in Bristol, and the man's six foot tall and weighs thirteen stone; so I don't trust him to no common hemp, be sure. I must get over to the prison afore any time be wasted. 'Tis a plot against the Law, and thicky woman have got to be catched as quick as possible."

"I'll lay my life she's the wife of the man!" cried Mrs. Hatch. "I see'd her name in the papers. She's been fighting like a demon for her husband's life, and wearying all the quality from the Lord Bishop of Exeter downward; but everybody have turned a deaf ear to her."

The hangman thought upon that while he pulled on his shoes.

"A brave and clever creature," he said calmly, "but no woman can come between a sinner and his doom in this fashion, not even his partner. She's put herself in the power of the Law now, and will have to answer for it."

Five minutes afterwards Mr. Merdle was on his way to Exeter Gaol, while Mrs. Hatch comforted the baby. Then Gregory told his story, and learned of Mrs. West's great and useless efforts on behalf of her husband.

"The evidence was circumstantial, but he had a fair trial, and no doubt exists that he committed the crime," said the Governor of the prison. "His wife's responsible for this, of course. She shall be sought after immediately."

And before dawn a couple of night-watchmen found Sarah West dead asleep in her own house. Worn out she was, no doubt, but they soon fetched her along to the gaol; and when she was brought there she made no bones about her little plot, and told it out afore Governor and hangman both.

"'Tis all a frantic wretch could do for him," she said. "None will listen, none will give heed; and I know, as well as I know I'm his wife, that my man didn't do it. 'Twas a fellow-labourer with Tom, but nobody can't prove the truth against the wretch. And I went to see this

gentleman last night, and took my babby to be struck, just for an excuse. Because I thought a wife might touch his heart, for 'tis well known he be called 'The Gentle Hangman.' And he was very kind indeed, but couldn't give no hope; and then, when I see'd the rope, God A'mighty sent a witty thought to run away with it. Of course, I knowed my babby was safe enough. And that's how 'tis. And if you chopped me to pieces, I wouldn't tell you where that rope be, kind sirs!"

She was firm as steel about it, and so was Mr. Merdle. She wouldn't tell where she'd hid his cord, and he wouldn't use no other. And two days would have to pass before he could send or go all the way to Bristol for another of his professional ropes, twined by himself.

"I'd best to return for it in person," he said to the gaol folk; "and I'm sure I do hope as the majesty of the Law won't do nothing very bad against this poor soul. She's the man's wife, and her wits have gived him another forty-eight hours in the land of the living. And who shall blame her? I don't, though this means two more journeys for me than I counted on. However, my wife will get her black-pudden all the sooner. 'Tis an ill wind that bloweth good to none."

That was the level-minded sort of man Gregory Merdle happened to be.

"Your brave rope be safe enough, sir," said Mrs. West. "But Heaven's my judge—it shan't strangle my husband!"

So it fell out that the execution was a lot delayed, and a turnkey informed the condemned man that his last morning on earth was not yet

come. He heard all the particulars also, but he did not bless his wife.

"Poor, dear, brave Sally, she meant well," said Tom West, "but what for? Two more of these days ban't no good to me. My peace be made. I'm innocent afore God, and the thief knows it. And his name be Ned Rivers, and his time will come in the next world if not in this. And the sooner I'm put away, the better for my temper!"

Nevertheless, when Mr. Merdle returned to Exeter two nights later, and went back to his old room at the house of Jane Hatch, a woman very near mad with joy waited for him, and his wonderful rope was there also.

"Not again, ma'am!" he said.

"Hast heard the great news?" she asked. But he had not, and so it happened that Tom West's wife was able to tell how another man—the chap by the name of Ned Rivers, a fellow-labourer with her husband—had come forward and made a clean breast, and confessed to the slaughter of the sheep.

"'Twas a plot against my Tom," she said. "And the man went down to the prison yesterday at noon and gave hisself up for the crime, because his fearful remorse had made him want to die. And my Tom will be free come to-morrow! And 'twas me as saved his life, Hangman Merdle!"

"And so you certainly did, then," allowed the executioner. "And nobody better pleased than me, I'm sure. How's your babby?"

"He's all right. And I've been allowed to see my husband, and he's cruel interested in the tale, and will be very proud if you can come and drink a dish of tea along with us and a few neighbours next week."

"Next week? No," answered the other, handling his restored rope. "If what you tell me be true, I'm free to go on to Plymouth by this night's coach. But when business calls me this way again, I shall be very pleased to have a tell along with you and your chap. Let it be a lesson to us all to trust in God and our wives, ma'am!"

"They be going to take up a collection for him," said Mrs. West.

He nodded and put his hand to his pocket. Something in her pale face and bright eyes and unsteady voice touched him up, no doubt, and he could guess at a little of what she'd been through.

"Well done you!" he said; "and 'tis very right and proper that everybody in these parts should do all they may for your good man. 'Tis a very shaking thing for the intellects to be condemned to the gallows, and then escape at the very last moment. And here's your sovereign back again, because I didn't earn it, you see; and may a hat full go along with it."

VI

THE REVENGE

I

TOZER GRIGG, he was a mill-man down to Babenay, by East Dart, in the ancient times out of mind. There's no mill now, but long ago 'twas a great place for grinding of corn, and the corn—both wheat and oats—comed from afar, and Miller Ouldsbroom—John Ouldsbroom he was—cut a big figure among the tenement farmers, and made a splash in the world, and married off his two darters to rich, comfortable men down-along in the ' in country,' as we call it. A good-hearted soul by all accounts; but he had his dash of pepper, like every other man who gets on in the world, and there was certain human weaknesses he couldn't abide at any price whatever. He had no use for a fool, and he quoted they doubtful Bible books against 'em. He often said that though we mourn for a wise man but seven days, we weep for a fool all the days of his life; and he'd prove beyond doubt and above power of figures to gainsay that 'twas the fools made most of the trouble in the world. "A knave cuts clean," he used to declare; "but, God's light on it! a fool's always a botcher; and

for my part I can forgive wickedness easier than foolishness."

A sort of a heathen man, you see, and his grievance with Tozer Grigg stood altogether beyond Scripture, for Tozer, with all his faults, was never known to stray outside the four corners of the Book, till he had his row with Miller Ouldsbroom; whereas the miller himself never did much in the religious line, though he certainly served his neighbours as himself, owed no man anything, never gave light weight, and worshipped his wife.

Grigg, I grant you, had no more sense than please God he should have, and his light-mindedness, so to call it, came out in a manner very annoying to Mr. Ouldsbroom. Finding himself the father of a big family, Tozer felt, and had felt for some years, that 'twas a case for a bit more on his wages; and upon the day that his wife brought him her eighth, he went over to the mill, after work time, and humbly axed to see his master. He wasn't the sort of man to choose the right day or hour for anything whatever, but he just blundered in at the very moment when Ouldsbroom was troubled with more corn than he knowed how to grind, and driven in other ways and worries—nought of account, but enough to fill his mind and make him testy with a know-nought oaf like Tozer.

Ouldsbroom was a black sort of chap—a 'just so,' brisk, fierce-eyed fashion of man, with a high colour, a blue muzzle always clean shaved, and a short sharp way at all times and to all people. In fact, a masterful, stern man; and yet, as you might say, a just man outside his own convictions. And one of these convictions was

that a long family, to anybody less than the King of England, was madness, and the root of all evil, and the worst sort of improvidence for work-folk.

To him crawled in Tozer Grigg; and the difference between 'em was the difference between a daddy-long-legs wandering helpless afore the wind, and a busy, bustling bee that knows its work and its way home and everything else that's worth knowing from a bee's point of view. Tozer was a wambling and a slack-twisted creature up over six feet high, with a head like a cocoanut stuck on a pole. He had hugeous hands and feet, and was gone in the back. He kept his jaws pretty far apart except when he was talking; then he shut 'em and mumbled his speech, as though his mouth was full of food. His tongue was too large, you see, and his nose was likewise too small. His hair was sandy and thin; he hadn't got no eyebrows; and his eyes were just pin-holes or little more. He was a sad man in company, and his wife said of him that he'd often shed tears of a Sunday—for why she never knew. But a good, attentive husband and father—in fact, far more of a father, you might say, than Mrs. Grigg had looked for or wanted.

He told his master about the coming of the eighth, as though 'twas an unexpected windfall; and while Johnny Ouldsbroom began to get up steam to give him hell, Tozer asked out in his silly bumbling way for a rise in wages. 'Twas almost too much for Miller. Purple as a plum he growed, and nearly dashed Grigg's cocoanut head off his shoulders. He told him he was a disgrace to the parish—no better than a buck

rabbit. He said 'twas him, and the likes of him, that was bringing England into the dust. He said that the man who bred children to fill pauper coffins was an enemy to the country and a traitor to the throne. In fact, he gave Tozer such a proper dressing-down that the man went out from before him in a bath of perspiration, and didn't stop or breathe almost till he'd got back into his own cottage, best part of a mile off up Dart valley. Then he picked his way among the children scattered through the kitchen—the big 'uns minding the little 'uns—and fetched to his bedroom, where his wife and his new baby and a female friend was all together. Mrs. Grigg had done very clever, according to her custom, but she was a bit down-daunted herself, because the eighth turned out to be the living daps of the sixth and seventh, and she'd rather hoped for something with a bit of new pattern about it.

Then Tozer pitches beside her and puts down his head in his hands, and begins his well-known foolish habit of shedding tears.

"'Tis almost too much," he says. "'Tis almost more than a human man can be expected to suffer. He ground me under his heel! He said 'twas me—me of all men—as have touched my hat to a one-hoss shay ever since I was born—me that be—— In fact, 'tis me, Tozer Grigg, be bringing England to the dogs, because I continue my manful part and go on getting children for the State, year in year out. Was ever such a giddy, rash man? Pauper coffins my family are to fill—how d'you like that, Ann Grigg? Your offspring—that we well know be meant for sailors and soldiers—to fight and fall if need be for the nation—they be going to fill

pauper coffins; so says Miller Ouldsbroom. My anger chucked up my throat when I heard it. And me, if you please, what be I going to get for my trouble? Be I to be richly rewarded? No, I ban't. I'm an enemy to the throne, I am, and a traitor to the country. And that I could have stood; but worse lies behind. What am I, Ann Grigg? What am I? A man, you might say. Far from it, far from it. I'm a 'buck rabbit,' that's what I am—a 'buck rabbit' was his beastly word; and that's going too far. I say it in the face of the nation, and you two women, that that's going a long sight too far. 'Buck rabbit's' too far for any husband to endure. He've done it now. The least of us have got our manhood, I believe. 'Tis all over. I'll be revenged on him, if I lose half my family over it! A terrible and a cruel revenge I'll have upon that hard-hearted curmudgeon, and I don't care who hears me say so. And well he'll deserve the worst I can think of against him."

"You ought to have known better than go to such a man with that tale," said the woman who sat by the window with Mrs. Grigg's new-born baby in her lap. "You know how he hates the little dears. None but a born fool would have asked him for a rise of wages on the strength of a rise of family."

"A born fool I am, and I grant it," answered Tozer. "And I've got the pull over a good lot of other born fools who be every bit as bad as what I am if not worse, and yet don't know it, and won't own up to it. But fool though I may be, by the act of God, yet I can strike for my credit like the wisest, and I ban't going to be called a 'buck rabbit' without hitting back. What

I shall do, I ban't exactly sure; but 'twill be a pretty sharp stroke I warn 'e, though he'll never find out who done it. I've got a bit of cunning in my nature, through my father's uncle, who was a thief-taker to Plymouth; and if I don't make Miller hop afore he's many months older, my name ban't Tozer Grigg."

The women tried to talk him into a better state of mind; and Ann Grigg, well knowing that Mr. Ouldsbroom was a generous and a kind-hearted creature, settled in her own soul to see him herself so soon as she was about again. Because, you must always understand that, though a weak reed in most ways, Tozer was really a useful man at the mill, and earned his money and more, and was a glutton for work. Eighteen hours a day was nought to him; and many people thought he only wept Sundays because he couldn't labour then also.

So that's how it stood, you see. Mrs. Tozer was secretly minded to visit the master presently, and undo the harm her husband had done; and he, smarting to his marrow, had resolved to make a terrible return against the miller—the devil helping. But in my opinion the devil haven't got no time to look after more than his own; and you might safely say that Grigg was a man without serious sin. So he had to run his show single-handed; for never will I believe Old Scrat helped him—else it would have turned out mighty different.

II

To work Babenay Mill a leat was took out of the river Dart two mile or more up-along. 'Twas

a little stream—fetched from the parent waters away up in the hills; and after it had done its work and turned the wheel, it went back to the river again. You can see the place of it now if you mind to; but all be changed since them days, and all the parties be in the churchyard to Widecombe, and the mill's gone, and the wheel have rotted away. A matter of about a mile above the mill you'll ax yourself how ever the water was carried forward, for there's a goyle there, or, as you'd say, a coomb or valley; and the old leat stops o' one side, and goes on again t'other; and you'll notice down below a thatched cottage, where old Tommy Grigg lives now, and his father and mother lived in the days I'm telling about. Well, the water was carried across by a very witty trick in a trough on trestles. It spanned the goyle away back behind Grigg's house; then, when it had fetched over, it went off again down a steep bit to the left, and so reached the mill at racing pace, and made the solid building shake when the wheel was driving the stones.

I tell you all this because you've got to know it, and without carrying a tolerable clear sight of the place, and the trestle-bridge for the water, and the mill beyond, and Tozer's house below, you'd miss the great business of his revenge and his manner of striking Ouldsbroom.

Of course, the miller had forgot all about Grigg in the morning, and didn't even remember about Tozer's eighth until his lady axed for Mrs. Grigg to come and do some chores at the mill, as she was often wont for a shilling a day. But of course she couldn't come for the moment. Tozer hadn't forgot, though. He did his work

regular as usual, but his trouble was festering deep in him. He was a slow thinker, even in his highest moments of rage, and he didn't hit on an idea to be upsides with his master for about three months or a bit more. Then it come over him like a blinding flash, and all of a moment he see'd his awful vengeance staring him in the face.

There was a plank sprung in the trestle-bridge about that time, and Tozer helped a man to mend it. And that simple accident put his dark thought into his head, and showed him how to punish Ouldsbroom. So off he went on the downward path—a very stickle and strange path to Tozer, though to some natural as eating and drinking. Even then he couldn't quite bring himself to his dark deed all of a moment, but had to screw himself up gradual over a month, with a drop of extra drink Saturdays and so on. What's more, he kept away from church two Sundays, much to everybody's surprise, for fear he might hear that which should turn him from his evil purpose. All these things his wife told another woman long after, else they'd never have got out. But Tozer hid nothing from his wife—at least, not after the great deed was done. He was the sort seemingly that can carry through a piece of wickedness without a word in any ear; but, so soon as ever 'tis a thing of the past, he must needs rush and let it out to another. It eases some fashion of consciences to tell their dark secrets, though they'd be in a pretty tantrum if the party that heard 'em told again. And as for Ann, she never did tell, to do her credit, till after Tozer died, and Ouldsbroom died also, and she, herself, was a bed-lier over eighty years of age.

By a very curious chance the man chose the same evening for his stroke as Mrs. Grigg pitched upon for hers; and while he was striking at Miller Ouldsbroom, all by himself in the dark, his wife had got the master's ear, and with the cunning of a mother of eight was trying to win a promise of better things for Tozer. And Ann didn't plead single-handed neither, for she'd got Mrs. Ouldbroom on her side from the first—her being a great lover of children and a great admirer of Mrs. Grigg's powers in that direction.

"What can I do for you, Ann?" asked the miller, in his short way; and she, knowing his likes and dislikes, was as short as him.

"'Tis my man," she said. "And fust I want to say he's terrible sorry he ever came troubling you when I was laid by. 'Tis only at such times he gets the chance to play the fool, for when I'm about I look sharp after him. And secondly I want to ax for just a little bit on to his money. I wouldn't for my life if he wasn't worth it; but, zany though he is to home, at the mill there's none can beat him for a peart and spry man—as you yourself have publicly given out. And your business be growing so that I might a'most be a widow save Sundays; and he'd work Sundays too if he could, I believe, but for his awful reverence for the Lord and you."

Mr. Ouldsbroom was in a good temper that evening, and smiled at this speech.

"Business growing, as you say; but a thing's only worth what it will fetch. You must remember that, Ann," he answers.

"I do, master," she says. "And Tozer fetches eighteen shillings a week; and he fetches it home, too; and that's more than some do.

That in itself is deserving of reward. He's a very good, honourable, soft man, or I shouldn't ax for him; an' he's terrible clever inside the mill, no matter what he may be out of it; an', taking one thing along with another, if you could see your way to a pound, you'd be no great loser in pocket and the richer every other way by his work and my prayers for you."

"What d'you want with such a lot of money?" he axes her.

But she wasn't to be catched that way. A sillier woman would have begun about the children, but not she.

"'Tis for the credit of Babenay Mill," she answers. "A man is known by how his servant goeth; and I like Tozer to have a bit of new broadcloth now and again—for Sundays and revels. I want him to be worthy of a good master; and I want, for my part, to be worthy of him. I ban't one of they trollops who don't care if their petticoats be trailing in the mixen. In fact, I have a pretty good conceit of myself yet, though I be the——"

"Mother of eight," she was going to say, but saved herself so clever as a hare doubling.

"Though I be the poorest woman in the parish, and never seen out of a sun-bonnet," she ends up.

With that, Ouldsbroom, who was pulling in the money with both hands just then, and finding everything go very suent both at home and abroad, he gives way to the clever creature, and makes Tozer's money a pound a week, and tells her to be off about her business when she began to bless him for it. Her eldest was waiting with her youngest outside, and her youngest was hollering in a proper tearing hunger; but Ould-

broom didn't hear the row by good luck, or he might have changed his mind. So Ann and her fifteen-year-old darter and three-months-old son all went back home together in a terrible pleasant frame of mind.

But, good though the news was, things happened to drive it clean out of Mrs. Grigg's head that night. In fact, 'twasn't till days after that she remembered about it. For while she'd been so mighty busy on her husband's account and scored such a triumph for the man, he'd been only too busy likewise. And this is what he'd done.

Full of his purpose he'd gone off up the goyle with nought but a gun and a lantern. His back-door opened that way, and he stuck it ajar and told the six young Griggs that were left at home to bide quiet and do no harm, because he was going out for to shoot a fox, as had been round three nights together stealing his poultry. So off he went, but not to shoot nothing. In fact, he very soon hid his gun behind a stone, and then climbed up the goyle to where the trestle water-bridge crossed it. Then, what does he do but take a heavy pick, that he'd hid there, and creep out on the bridge and begin to break it down in the midst!

You see, the bird-witted fool had argued thus: if the bridge was broke down, the water couldn't go to the mill; if the water couldn't go to the mill, the mill couldn't grind corn; and if the mill couldn't grind corn, the miller would have to lose his custom and suffer by it. He judged 'twould very likely take months and months to mend the trestle-bridge, and meanwhile 'twas clear that hungry people would carry their oats

and wheat away from John Ouldsbroom. 'Twas the busiest time of the year he chose; and he knowed that the bridge was very weak in places, so 'twould be thought that it was nature had gived out and the rotten thing carried away. That's all Tozer's brain found room for. He didn't see no other side to it, and he didn't appear to know one or two everyday things about water and wages that everybody knows, and that would have been better for him to know too afore he set off on this piece of monkey-like wickedness.

'Twas very soon done, of course. A few heavy blows with the pick went through the wood floor of the leat, and a few more blows cracked a big hole, and the running stream did the rest. 'Twas a dark night, and so still as the grave. Then came a cracking and rending, and a great hole gaped in the midst of the trestle bridge. The water all run dry at once 'pon the side where Tozer stood, lantern in hand; and from t'other side, where the leat split off, there fell a thundering, raving cataract of water, waist deep, and yelling like a hundred demons.

Grigg felt a little bit scared to think of the size of the crime he had committed, and he doubted not that thè terrible row would soon bring up folk from the mill and other houses; for 'twas as though all Dartymoor was going to be drownded. Then he felt the end of the broken-down trestle was no place for him to be catched, so he crept back quick, like a wicked Jack o' Lantern, and doused his light and set off to creep back home. 'Twas then that, out of the dark and din below, he heard a yell louder than the water itself, and then another. Down he went, so quick as his long silly legs could take him; but of course the

water was there first. It had roared straight and slap at Tozer's own dwelling-house, like a bull at a gate—stram-bang into the door it had rushed, without 'by your leave,' and six children of all sizes was being drownded by degrees inside, and the water was whirling round and dancing a regular devil's dance in kitchen, and parlour, and bedrooms too. Grigg said afterwards that in his great agony he could only think of one thing, and he kept hollering out, "The harmonium! Oh, my God, the harmonium!" But his wife comed home up the goyle at the same moment, and the two of 'em, by all accounts, was catched in the torrent together, and swept in among their yowling children. But the eldest girl, she had the sense to keep outside with the babby. They got the poor little things up 'pon tables and the mantelshelf in the kitchen, and fought for 'em so well as they could in the darkness.

Then Ann opened a window—a thing her husband never would have thought upon—and a few million tons of the water went out through, and carried a child or two out with it, 'twas said, together with a good bit of the household property that would float. In fact, odds and ends belonging to the Griggs was found all down the valley for days and months after. And, while the missis fought like a hen with a hawk, Tozer lighted a candle somehow, and counted over his family, and sat up on the table along with 'em and cried bitter tears. But Ann, she raised the manhood in him after a bit, and by that time a few fellows, hearing the row and finding the leat had stopped running in the wheel-chamber and the valley had got a new river in it, came running up; and they cut a way for the water and dammed

it off the house so well as they was able in the great darkness. And Ann ran her eye over the eight, and set to work to dry 'em and to praise her God that they was all there; and a clever man, by name of French, ran a mile up the valley without stopping, and shut off a sluice-gate; and so the matter ended for that night. For, as Ann Grigg used often to tell after, Tozer reckoned that she had suffered about enough for one evening; and he told her nought about his own goings on till a good bit after.

Neighbours came up and took the soaking childer till the next day; and the eldest went with the last but one, and t'others were divided among the good friends who offered for 'em; but the babby kept along with his mother. Not that either parent slept, as you may suppose, for they was baling out their dwelling till long after breakfast-time next day; and when the dawn did set in it showed them the dreadfullest and terriblest sad sight that ever either had see'd—or any other body.

But 'twasn't till half after six that thicky brave Ann saw enough to make her break down. Then it was, in the dimpsy of the morning, that she found the back side had come out of the grandfather-clock she'd got when her parents died, and that the family Bible was still under water in a corner, and all the dates of the whole eight children sunk to pulp. She also discovered that her parlour was knee-deep in stones and peat-bog, and the stuffed birds in a glass case falled to pieces, and the harmonium bellows water-logged, and the carpet done for, besides many another fantastic and cruel thing, nought to name, but terrible to suffer. Therefore, for the

first and last time, she gave over working for five minutes, and hollered with her face in her soaking apron.

'Twas hell let loose without a doubt. The dwelling didn't have no upper storey, being merely a five-room cot stuck in the hill, and understanding men said, the day after, that 'twas only by God's mercy, and Mrs. Grigg opening the window, that the whole thing wasn't washed down into the valley two hundred feet below. It made an old woman of Ann, as she often said in her later life. She had but two more childer after that night; and she took to caps and went grey as a badger afore she was five-and-forty. But the amazing thing of all in my opinion was that it didn't leave no sort of mark on Tozer. He'd screwed himself up to the fighting pitch next morning, and when Mr. Ouldsbroom came up the valley afore seven o'clock, the first thing he saw was Grigg up on the trestles, working for all he was worth, and helping the men who was already there with the first light to mend it.

III

'Twas about the only clever thing Tozer Grigg ever did do, I reckon. For the sight of him there, toiling in his dog-like, desperate way for the mill when, in all right and reason, he might have been expected to be looking after his own affairs, quite moved John Ouldsbroom.

"You get home, you silly mumphead," he said. "Your place is there. In a jakes of a mess 'tis, too, for I've just been there; and 'twill

take a month o' Sundays to get the water out of it, not to name the mud."

"Ban't of no account so long as us can finish this job and set the river flowing to the mill," answers Tozer; for, you see, his anger very soon cooled after he'd done his crime, and, in fact, never was there a man with the fear of God working stronger in him than Grigg at that moment. For he see'd how his evil passions and wicked schemings had turned and come back like a cuss on his own head; and how, but for a watchful Providence, six of his eight might have been drownded to death by their father's hand. So, without doubt, he'd made a tidy lot o' promises to Heaven never to let his temper get the better of him no more. Like a knife in the hand of a young child was his revenge: he only cut hisself to the bone.

Tozer told his wife all about it some time after, because he found his conscience become such a terrible scourge—especially when he heard how Miller was going to put two shilling on his wages, and help a little with the house—that he couldn't hold it in no more.

It happened this way. Ann, she feared that following such a reverse, and the mill not going for two and a half working days, that Mr. Ouldsbroom would be sure to change his mind and say, owing to such a tragedy, Tozer mustn't think to get no more for a good while, if ever; but Ouldsbroom was a man of his word, and never thought to go back upon it—more especially after he saw Tozer the very morning after the smash so zealous on his account. Therefore the two shilling went on, and Grigg, cut to the heart to think how his evil had been rewarded by Miller's

good, made up his mind to tell Ouldsbroom and get his trouble off his conscience, and take his punishment like a man. Luckily for all parties, he told his wife first, not the miller; and when she heard what he'd done, she very near went off in a faint; but when she heard what he meant to do, then she very quickly come round again.

She looked him over first—as if he was a new sort of doubtful insect that had flown in the window off Dartymoor; then she gasped, and her knees shook under her, and she thought 'twas an evil dream.

"For my great and terrible revenge I done it," he said. "Yes; the very night you went off unbeknownst and got the man to put up my wages! So true as I'm speaking to you, at the very hour he was saying 'two shilling a week more,' I was out 'pon the trestles, like the dark, wicked devil I am, knocking down his waterway."

"You anointed fool!" said Ann, finding her words at last. "Couldn't you see that with our house just exactly in the midst of the goyle a hundred yards below, the water must come straight upon our back-door and nowheres else?"

"Yes," answered Tozer, "I could see it—afterwards—nobody better than me. I could mark, as clear as the cleverest man amongst us, that when the water began to go down the hill 'twould meet our place half ways down. But, as you know, I ban't the sort of man to be wise afore a thing happens; and I never have pretended to be; and now my conscience is only too clear about it. 'Tis my bounden duty, as a man of position with a wife and family, to win back

my good name; and by God's blessing I will do it. I've sinned far, far worse than ever you'd have thought I'd got it in me to sin. And I be going to make atonement."

"Be you?" said she. "Then perhaps you'll tell me how."

"There's only one way. I must go to Miller Ouldsbroom and make a clean breast of it," he assured her. "My mind's made up on that point."

However, Ann knowed all about his mind, and mighty soon she helped him to unmake it again.

"You'll do well to list to me," she said. "You think 'tis your bounden duty, as a man with a wife and family, to let this piece of rascally wickedness out of the bag; and I'll tell you that 'tis just because of your wife and family you'll do no such thing. If you was a bachelor, you might go to penal servitude and stop there for all anybody would care—and richly would you deserve it—but as things are, I'm your wife for my sins, and I should very much like to know what me and your eight be going to do while you pick oakum and sing hymns and get even with your conscience. Ban't a case for luxuries of that sort in my opinion. In fact, your conscience will have to go to the wall this time, while you give your common sense a bit of work. God knows you ain't got enough to hide a farthing piece at best; but, such as 'tis, you'll have to use it now. And as for suffering, you've suffered enough; or if you haven't, your sticks and your wife and children have done; and, as usual, the sins of the father be visited on the family. So I'll thank you to keep a still tongue about this

piece of work. And this I'll also say: That if you tell and go to prison, I shan't have no use for you when you come out. Mind that. If you get in clink, I'm a goner, so sure as my name was once Ann Reddaway. No Postbridge Reddaway ever married a chap that got locked up, and if I'm to be the first—however, I hope I've said enough."

With that she stopped, and Tozer frankly admitted she'd said enough and to spare. He nodded and nodded, and shed a few of his bitter tears; and you might say they was in place for once; and then he allowed that she'd showed him how the case stood from her point of view, and that, on the whole, he'd still his conscience in another sort of direction. Which he did do by working for Miller Ouldsbroom early and late, winter and summer, as never one man worked for another in this world afore. And even then, his conscience wasn't set to rest, because by rights there should have been no extra pay for all this extra work; instead of which, when Tozer's family rose to ten, which it did do some two or three years after, the miller, who'd changed his views about offspring owing to being very addicted to his grandchilder, actually put up Grigg's money again. Four-and-twenty shillings he got, and it didn't go down for years and years, till his spider legs began to give way and his usefulness failed him. But by that time his eldest boys were making a bit of money, and the family had took a tidy place in the land.

VII

PARSON AND CLERK

WHEN I TELL A TALE, you may lay your life 'tis a true one, for the fear of a lie was planted in me at a very tender age. 'Tis my own grandfather I be going to speak about, and not a bit more or less than solemn fact do I ever put in the story.

Us have got to go back-along very near a hundred year, and Little Silver weren't then what it is now by any means. Now 'tis a very pushing place, with fine houses round about and a power of visitors in summer; but when my grandfather lived 'tweren't half the size, and rather behind the times at that. However, the church was there, of course, and a sizable dwelling or two. And the parson was his reverence John Scobell, and the clerk was my grandfather. You'll find their headstones not twenty yards apart in the churchyard, and their little quarrel be sunk in the past deeper than they themselves be sunk in the pit.

Andrew Heathman was my grandfather's name, and he had a bit of a farm two mile out from Little Silver. There he lived along with his wife and four children: three maidens and my father, who was the eldest of the family. A

man very well thought upon was Andrew. He had a light and gladsome heart, and not a foe till he turned of forty-five; and then, through no fault of his own, these things happened to him.

William Butt—the only enemy as grandfather ever had—might have been a thought younger than Andrew Heathman; but the trouble comed from him, and the facts are clear enough. Butt, to begin with, was a foreigner—an Exeter man. He settled in our village, however, and done very well for himself, being a cobbler and a God-fearing chap to the eye. He married Farmer Bickford's daughter, went to church regular, and gave no credit in his business.

I can tell you what these two men looked like, for I've had it from father, who knowed 'em both well. Billy Butt was a black sort of chap, hairy as a spider, with a dark eye and a fighting nose. Justice was what he set afore everything; and some said, seeing what a stickler he was for the last farthing, that there was Jew blood in his veins. A very fine, tall man, though round in the shoulders, owing to his trade. He was a tower of strength to the vicar, owing to a way he had with the boys and a great gift of teaching in Sunday-school. When the young youths saw such a powerful chap as Butt along to church Sundays, and always prayerful and pious, even on Saturday night, they felt that there must be something in religion; and there's no manner of doubt that the man did a deal of good in his stern way. But it shook a few when he had Widow Crocker up for five shillings—a debt her husband left behind when he was killed sudden at Stickle-path village in the sawpit there. Crocker died cruel

behind in the matter of money, and Butt lost his five shilling; and my grandfather said a sharp thing or two about it in company at the Hearty Welcome, which Butt never forgave. For grandfather, in his breezy way, showed him up and told him to his face he was the sort of sharp-clawed chap as devoured widows' houses; and Billy didn't like it. Then, to make matters worse, my old man kept the cobbler waiting for three months for the price of three pair of boots, and when Butt met him and told him short and sharp that he gave no credit, grandfather just said he knowed it, and that the cobbler must be larger-minded and do unto others as he would have them do unto him. With that Black Billy flared up and told Andrew Heathman that he didn't want no lesson in his duty from him, and grandfather answered that, so far as he could see, Butt needed teaching as much as anybody.

"But no doubt you'm so busy of a Sunday telling the childer their whole duty to God and man, that you haven't got any time to see or larn where you miss your own!" says grandfather in his fearless way.

As to Andrew's appearance, he was a stuggy chap, with a round barrel and a big voice, and little bright eyes always quick to get the fun out of life. But a religious man, with a very unusual way of rejoicing in other people's luck.

After he had got talked to so straight, then 'twas war to the knife between cobbler and grandfather, as you may suppose, for Butt was terrible proud; and to be told their duty is a thing very few men will stand from a fellow-man. They was both clever, both could read and write as well as I can, and both might be said to be

public characters. Because my grandfather was clerk, and Butt was a sidesman, and kept the church accounts in a very skilful manner, and Mr. Scobell thought the world of him.

Each had plenty of friends, though father, as native born and bred to Little Silver, naturally numbered most. Besides, there was more human nature in him. He had a wink for the girls, and a penny for the childer, and a half-pint for a friend any day of the week. He liked his meat and drink, and didn't carry Sunday ways into the weekdays so conspicuous as what Butt did.

But 'twas in the part of parish clerk that Andrew Heathman might be said to shine brightest. For years and years he never missed a service; but now you can't even see where he used to do his part so regular, for that old gallant pulpit be pulled down, though I mind it very well as a boy, and the players' gallery too. Now there's nought but a stone pulpit, scarce lifted a yard above our heads; but long ago us had a lofty masterpiece, so noble as a ship in full sail; and parson's place was in the middle of it, and grandfather's place was down beneath him, while high above 'em both was the preaching stand, to which the clergyman used to climb—when the time come for his discourse.

Now the great trouble began thus: William Butt went one Saturday night into the Hearty Welcome to see a young man as he wanted to save from wasting his money on liquor. The young man wasn't there, but my grandfather was, together with old Westaway, and Matthew Pearn, and Ben Pierce, and Alec Chastey, and a good few other neighbours. There was a rally

of friends to welcome back Michael Ford, a sailorman who had been away from his home for ten year and seen many of the wonders of the deep. Well, everybody was very jolly, and who shall blame them? And Hannaford, the innkeeper, knowed there was only half an hour left afore closing time, so naturally he didn't want to waste no words with Butt, who was teetotal at best, and never been known to rise above a bottle of ginger-beer.

"Young Parsons ban't here," said grandfather; "and so much the worse for him, for we'm having a pretty evening. Don't you worrit the boy with religion too bad, Billy Butt, else you'll drive him in the opposite direction."

'Twas a rash thing to say, I grant you; but grandfather happened to be in a mellow mood, with a drop of good spirits in him, and his pipe drawing suent. They'd made him chairman of the gathering, and all was going merry as a marriage bell, when Butt comed in upon the fun, like a nip of east wind when a door's opened.

"No call for you to be so sour, my dear," said Farmer Westaway in his gentle fashion of speech.

"I should think not," says Pearn. "I've no patience with these here psalm-smiting people, as always pretend they've just been buttonholing God A'mighty, and put on the airs of Moses coming down the Mount."

"Pitch along by the fireside, William Butt, and listen to Michael Ford here telling about icebergs," said grandfather; but by that time the cobbler was long past icebergs and his temper loose.

"You ought to blush for yourselves, you old men," he said. "In these bad times, with wars and rumours of wars around us, and God forgotten, and the young going to rack and ruin on every side, you ought to fight for righteousness, instead of meeting here to sing and drink and help the devil's business!"

Then Hannaford growed a bit red behind the bar, as well he might, and spoke out straight.

"No politics, if you please, Mr. Butt," he said. "I'll have none of it in my bar parlour; and 'tis more than you can do, or parson either, to show that singing and drinking be contrary to the Word of God; so now then!"

"'Tis Jeremiah and milk," says young Sammy Youldon, a terrible clever chap with a sharp tongue, educated at Plymouth.

And, if you'll believe me, from that day forward Billy Butt was called 'Jeremiah and milk' till he left Little Silver ten years later.

Well, the upshot was that he went out of the bar in a hell of a rage, and marched straight off to his reverence. What he said was only got afterwards by a side wind; but there's no doubt that Mr. Scobell's ear was cruelly abused, for three days later the parson had grandfather afore him in the vestry, and told him that he felt 'twas time they made a change to church.

"What sort of change, sir?" asks my grandfather.

"A change of clerk," says parson.

"Jimmery!" cries grandfather. "This is the first I've heard of it. Why for do your reverence say this?"

"To be plain with you," answers parson, "I'm not quite satisfied with your conduct out

of church, Mr. Heathman. My clerk must be above reproach. I've heard things not to your credit."

"'Tis last Saturday night at the Hearty Welcome?" asks grandfather.

"I do not think we need enter into details, and I hope you won't press for them," answers his reverence.

"I don't want no details," declares grandfather. "If you've heard any details that I've misbehaved myself, they are lies, Reverend Scobell, and I'll prove it when and where you like."

"I cannot allow myself to discuss the matter, Andrew," answered parson. "At any rate, after next Sunday I appoint a new clerk. And I must ask you kindly to resign, and so save me the sorrow of dismissing you and creating a scandal in Little Silver."

"No, I ban't going to resign," said grandfather firmly.

"Then I must dismiss you."

"That won't do neither, your reverence. I ban't going to permit it."

Then Mr. Scobell, though the mildest-mannered and kindest of men, got niffed.

"We shall see, Andrew Heathman," he said in a very tragical voice.

"So we shall, your reverence," answers my grandfather—firm as a rock.

They left it at that, and the village had something spicy to talk about till next week.

Come Sunday, after axing out the marriages, parson told the people that hereafter he was going to have a new parish clerk, and that Mr. William Butt would be the man! There was a

regular rustle through the congregation, like the wind getting up all of a sudden, and my grandmother went fainty and had to be led out by two of her girls. But grandfather took it calm, and waited his time, and went on with the service as if 'twas nothing of any account.

There was a lot of chattering after prayers, and the promise of a pretty lively row presently. People took sides, as they do over everything—next world and the way to get there included—but 'twas a very uncomfortable look-out for Billy Butt, because not above a dozen folk, including his own wife, upheld him, whereas grandfather had the village with him, you might say. Old Tom Cobley, and Tom Redvers—grandfather of Saul Redvers—and Matthew Pearn, and Jack Pearn, and the Chasteys, father and son, and a score of resolute men, including Hannaford of the public-house, and Westaway, and, of course, my father, was all on the side of the old parish clerk; while against 'em they had William Arscott, and the sexton, and his reverence, and Squire Yeo—a man too lazy to think for himself, and always ready to go the way any stronger creature axed him—and Billy Butt.

Well, Andrew Heathman held a sort of a meeting at the Hearty Welcome, and told his friends what he was going to do about it; and Parson Scobell had a meeting too. And when grandfather heard what had happened at that meeting, through Jimmy Masters, who went to it, and changed his mind afterwards and came over to our side, he knowed how 'twas to be.

Jimmy runned in the bar full of his news, and though grandfather began by saying he didn't want nothing to do with an enemy, he forgived

Masters and let him join us when he heard what the Reverend Scobell had ordained.

"They reckon," says Jimmy, "that a resolute man like you will try and take your place willy-nilly; so parson, who don't want no upstore in the house of God, be going to guard the clerk's desk against you by main force. So soon as church is open, the sexton, that whey-faced fool, Peter Lawrence, is to stand afore the entrance of the clerk's desk; and just before service Billy Butt be going up into it; and they've got five men to guard him from any interference. They be Lawrence, and the Thatchers from Weston Farm, and his reverence's son, Mister Walter, who's home just now, and me. But I shall tell Butt to-morrow as I've gone over to you, being as great a oner for justice as him; so they'll have to find somebody else, and 'twill take 'em a longful time."

So that was how it stood, and the party looked to grandfather to know what he thought to be at.

He soon told 'em.

"The clerk's desk be mine by law and ordinance," he said, "and I'll dare the country to turn me out of it. Right be my side, to begin with, and I'll have might my side also. If I'm in the desk afore Butt comes, 'twill take a better man than him to turn me out."

"How be you going to get in, my dear?" asks old Westaway.

"That's the reason we be here, uncle," says my grandfather. "We can't get the keys, for certain, because sexton's against us; but there's a night coming afore the Sabbath morn, and during that night, in a proper Christian spirit, I

be going to break in the church and take my place. Then the first thing the worshippers will see is the old clerk in the old spot, with six of you bold heroes ranged round about to keep law and decency in the Lord's house."

'Twas held a very proper plan, and everybody wanted to go in and back up grandfather; but he chose six only, mostly bachelors, because, as he said very truly, let it get about, and the church might be watched by night, and something happen in the churchyard as would be bad for the cause of religion.

So he just chose his son, my father that was, and young Luke Ferrars the wrestler, and Tom Redvers, for his noted strength, and they non-marrying men Matt and Jack Pearn, and the younger Chastey. Jimmy Masters begged to be chosen also because he'd split on the other meeting, so grandfather let him come.

Then 'twas how to get grandfather into the church unbeknownst; and that they did very easy by taking out a bit of leaded glass from the vestry window. All went well, because the Saturday night was fine and clear, though cold; and they popped grandfather into church, all in his Sunday clothes, wi' a cold pasty and a bottle of cordial, so as he might pass the night pretty easy, and be up to the mark in the morning. He slept very sound in the Squire's pew, so he told 'em after, and then he went and had a wash in the vestry, and got up in the clerk's box and kept out of sight when Lawrence comed in and opened the church. But long afore the bells beginned, in marched my father, and Ferrars and Redvers, and the Pearns, and Chastey and Jimmy Masters. And they settled down in a row so near the pulpit

as they could get. Then comed the other party, as you might call the enemy; and so soon as ever Butt walked up the aisle, grandfather, who waited for that moment, pops up out of the clerk's box, and stands there so calm as a lion, looking down at the folk!

Butt and his party beginned to chitter, and young Mister Walter Scobell, parson's son, was for going up there and then and dragging grandfather down by the leg, if need be; but Redvers, he barred the way in a very respectful manner, and explained that him and his friends was there to see fair-play done, as became honest men and good Christians.

Not much praying went on, I warn 'e! The church was in a regular hum—more like a beehive just afore swarming than the house of God. But the players set up their moosic, and his reverence, who knowed what had happened, sailed in with his garments flying about him. He went to his place and buried his face as usual, and the moosic stopped, and there came a terrible silent moment. 'Twas 'which he should,' as we say, and Butt's side pinned their faith to his reverence, and my grandfather's side was quite sure in their own minds that Heathman would win. And if he didn't win, Ferrars and Redvers, who wasn't exactly God-fearing men in the highest sense, meant to paint the church red, and fight to the last for grandfather rather than he should be throwed out.

"Andrew Heathman!" began parson, in his solemnest tone of voice, "I order you, in the name of Law and of God, whose servant I am, to leave the clerk's desk, in order that the man I have appointed to take your place may do so."

"Reverend John Scobell," answers back grandfather, clear as a bell, "I ban't going to budge an inch!"

"And why for do you refuse?" asks parson.

"I'll tell you," says grandfather. "I've been clerk of this parish for nearly sixteen years, since I was thirty year old, and if anybody in this church can call home a better clerk, let him up and do so."

"Not one soul amongst us!" piped old Cobley from down by the font.

"Very well. Now you tell me I'm to go. And I humbly ax your reverence to tell me why I'm to go?"

With that up jumps Squire Yeo.

"Don't answer him, Scobell!" he says, very excited. "Don't bandy words with the rascal. How does he dare to——"

He'd got that far when Tom Redvers interrupted him. "You be quiet, your honour," he says, very firm, for he was an independent man, and had nought to fear from the quality. "You don't know nothing about this bobbery, and you've no right to interfere. The difference be between parson and clerk, and we'm here to see fair-play, if you please."

"You tell me to go, and I deny it and defy it," says grandfather, calm as a rock. "'Tis a great slur on my character for goodness, and an insult to my growing family and my friends in general. I'm forty-six year old; my voice is sound as a bell; I can read the hard words as easy as any man, barring your reverence's self, and I behave in a seemly manner both inside church and outside it. Then what have you got against me? Ban't I in reason to ax to know, neighbours?"

The people hummed, and Mr. Westaway rose up in his place and spoke. "If you please, your reverence, the man's in the right of it," he said. "You'm a very high-minded creature, and none's got any cause but to respect you, to my knowledge. But if you sack Andrew here without telling us for why, we shall take it very unkind, to say it respectful."

Then Squire and young Mister Walter made a diversion, and, most improperly, had a dash for clerk's desk; but Ferrars stopped Mister Walter, and laid him down gentle as a sucking babe; and Redvers took Squire by his coat collar, to the wonder of the people, and held him back. I'm sorry to say then that Squire Yeo forgot where he was, and used a crooked word; and Butt's party, feeling 'twas their turn, now chipped in, and had a dash for the clerk's box. Another moment, and there'd have been sacrilege without a doubt; but parson's voice was lifted like a trumpet, and he stilled the breaking storm.

"Peace, peace!" he cried. "Wretched men, remember where you stand! In God's name, let everybody sit down in his place and listen to me!"

They obeyed, of course, when he mentioned the Name; and he went on.

"It has come to my ears that Andrew Heathman is a frequenter of drinking places, and has been seen under the influence of liquor. Is not that enough?"

"More than enough," said Squire Yeo; and then Sammy Youldon looked across at the men-servants from Yeo Hall, and said to a footman:

"When did you last carry the master up to bed after his dinner, Teddy Bassett?"

"Hush, hush!" cried the people, and grandfather spoke.

"Let the man or woman or child who has ever knowed me the worse for liquor stand up here in the House of the Lord and speak against me," he said. "If there's one being in this place as ever saw me even bosky-eyed, I'll get down out of my box and never more come into it. If there's one here can do it—only one!"

"Bravo, father!" said my father in his excitement; and the folk cried "Hush, hush!" again.

"Come!" said grandfather, "testify against me, you people of Little Silver."

But not a living soul moved. Of course, there wasn't so much as a mouse in the thorpe as had ever seen the man drunk, or near it.

The Reverend Scobell looked towards Billy Butt.

"I must ask you to speak, William Butt," he said.

"Truth's truth," began the cobbler. "I went into the Hearty Welcome a bit ago to try and find a man there and get him away; and there was Andrew Heathman; and if he wasn't drunk, he was near it. Far too much he'd taken; God's my judge if he hadn't."

"Now we know where we stand, then," answered grandfather. "Be you a teetotaler, or ban't you, William Butt?"

"Yes, I am."

"And never took beer or spirits in your life?"

"Never."

"Then how do you know what's too much, and what isn't too much?"

"You were excited and mighty wild," says the cobbler. He flinched a bit, too, for some men were hissing.

"So be you now," answered grandfather.

"But shall us say you'm drunk, because your voice goes up into your head and your beard flies about like a bush in a gale of wind?"

Then he turned to Mr. Scobell.

"There was upwards of ten men in the bar parlour of Mr. Hannaford's public-house that night, your reverence," he said; "and every man of the ten be in this church at this minute. Ax 'em. They ban't all my friends, and they've got nought to gain by saying I was sober if I was not. Stand up, you chaps, and let his reverence see you."

Up got the ten, including Michael Ford, the sailor they'd met together to welcome.

"Was Heathman sober that night?" asks the parson.

And every man said "Yes!" except Hannaford, who said, "Sober as a judge, and always is!"

"'Tis one teetotaler's word against the nation, you may say," summed up grandfather. "And on that I'll make bold to ax you, for my credit's sake and my family's sake, to go on with Morning Prayer and say no more about it, reverend sir. Perhaps the man meant well; perhaps he wanted to have my place, and didn't care how he got it. Anyway, I forgive him. But he ain't got sufficient knowledge of the subject of drink to pass opinions upon it, or tell the difference between a fresh man and a market-merry one. Then again, how can such an ignorant chap decide if a man's 'beastly' drunk, or 'blind' drunk, or, in a word, 'dead' drunk? These be things that call for wide understanding. And that's all I've got to say, except that, having right and justice, and Little Silver and God A'mighty on my side, I'll not go down, your reverence."

Then by way of answer the clergyman spoke in this handsome manner:

"It is very clear to me that you have been wronged, Andrew Heathman, and I am the first to confess it and to regret it. The fault is mine. All blame lies upon my shoulders, and I apologise to you and to your friends for this painful position in which you have been placed. I was much preoccupied when the charge was brought against you, and did what I have done without giving so grave a matter the attention that it demanded. But you have been vindicated, and handsomely vindicated; and it was meet and right that you should be vindicated—here, in the house of God, where you have discharged your duties for so many years. Come to me in the vestry after service, Andrew Heathman; and you, William Butt, will do likewise. You have erred, William Butt; you have erred through over-confidence, as we all do only too often. Your own experience of intoxication is happily too small to enable you to sit in judgment on other men. I should have remembered that and sought for witnesses. Let those concerned in this mattèr gather together with me in the vestry after service. And I shall then lift a prayer to our God and Father, that He may pardon weak man his faults and forgive one and all of us."

The folk nodded and hummed, and none ever thought better of his reverence than at that moment, when he took all the blame in such a large-minded and holy manner.

But I'm sorry to say the lesson was quite lost on Billy Butt. In fact, the man comed very badly out of the business, and took his gruel in

a most outrageous spirit. My father used to tell how, just as all seemed over and everybody was settling down to 'Rend your heart and not your garments,' when up spoke Butt wi' a voice like an angry turkey.

"Do I understand that you've changed your mind, Reverend Scobell?" he asks. "Ban't I to be clerk henceforward?"

"No," said the clergyman. "The incident is closed. Mr. Heathman will continue to be clerk. And you will presently express your regret and sorrow for bearing false witness against him. As a Christian man I expect you to do no less."

"Never!" answers t'other. "And I'll go further: if I ban't chosen, me and my friends here will go out of this house and walk across the green straight into the Wesleyan Chapel for evermore! Here I say it afore the people. Now you can just decide."

For answer Parson Scobell began to read Morning Prayer, and Butt and two of his friends and their females went out of the church on the spot. They were Dissenters for a year and three months. Then the pastor to their place of worship left his wife and runned away with a middle-aged virgin that used to keep house for Tom Cobley. And it shook back full half of the Wesleyans into Church members again. Not so Butt and his wife, however. He kept his word, and never put his nose in the Establishment no more.

VIII

THE RED ROSE

THAT DEAD ROSE 'pon the mantelshelf under a li'l glass shade have bided there, between they two white cloam dogs, through winter an' summer for fifty year, an' 'tis more'n that since it budded and blowed. 'Twould fall to dust if you moved un; yet I'd not have it do so till I be put away; then her'll go under wi' me—back to the earth us both springed from so long since. My childer smile at me—they'm fathers an' mothers now themselves; an' their childer laugh, for what lad or lass can't teach the gran'mothers to suck eggs nowadays? But there 'tis yet—the ghostie of a red rose, an' so dear to me as the memory of the time when 'twas plucked, an' the dead man as plucked it. An' a mystery, too; for though there ban't no magic in the story, yet it comed forth o' magic, if you understand me; 'twas a strange happening as could never have falled out but for my great faith.

My maiden name was Bassett, Margaret Bassett, younger darter of Sexton Bassett—a man as digged more graves by all accounts than ever a sexton to Little Silver afore. They do say that Sexton Baker—the present man—don't go so deep as my faither, but I wouldn't speak a word

against the old soul, I'm sure; an', deep or shallow, us'll all lie wi'in earshot o' the Trump. Good havage[1] the Bassetts comed of, though they've sinked lower of late. But I held my head so high as them that had gone afore me when I was nineteen, being a bowerly, pink-an'-white maid, wi' hair darker'n a winter night. So at least Enoch was pleased to think. That was the font name of un; an' t'other was Dawe. An under-gardener him, up to Oakshotts when first I knowed him—a man six foot tall, wi' a red skin an' sand-coloured hair, an' eyes so blue as lupins. The Little Silver gals laughed at him somewhat, why for I couldn't tell e', for he was a man of seemly parts, a clean liver, and one as stood to work. But his amazin' directness of speech made him 'pear differ'nt to other men. He talked little enough, but allus to the point. Wasn't no more 'feared o' the naked truth than you o' that cat sleepin' 'pon the hearth-stone. An' as he telled it in season an' out, he didn't have so many friends as he might. Silent by nature too, an' short an' sharp in manner; but Squire Bewes, as was a plain-dealer hisself, found out the worth of un, an' said in company, as I heard through Tom Aggett, footman to Oakshotts, that Enoch Dawe was 'bout the only man ever he met that 'peared unequal to lyin'.

Though a under-gardener was a chap a long way under the point of my nose as I cocked it in them days, yet I growed friends wi' Enoch—out of curiosity first, then from other reasons. I let un take me to a fairing wi' my sister Jane; an' I went up to Oakshotts, when the fam'ly was from home, to see the fine things he'd worked

[1] *Havage*—stock.

there—'mazin' carpet-beddin' an' such-like furrin gardening. Butivul 'twas, for certain, an' cost a mint o' money, so Enoch said.

He never spoke soft—never so much as squeezed my hand. Words was allus hard wi' him; an', in his jonic way, if he'd said anything at all to me, 'twould have been the truth; an' he was feared to tell that. But I was wife-old, and very interested in men-folk; an' I see'd in the blue eyes of the man all what he thought about me. They was so honest as his tongue, you see, an' couldn't hide the truth.

There fell a midsummer eve when the world was fifty year younger, an' maids simpler in their ways, an' not 'shamed of puttin' faith in fairy stories. And there's me and my sister Jane, wi' the moon in the sky, at midsummer midnight in our li'l garden o' flowers—sweet williams, lad's love, crumple lilies,[1] pinks, grannies' night-caps, an' herbs for many uses. 'Twas a glitter o' dew below an' stars above; an' the valley silent save for the owl from Farmer Endicott's owl tree; an' the earth asleep; an' the distant cots, as climbs the hill far off, lookin' like white goblin men a-squat on the moor-side wi' their eyes blinkin' in the moon an' their thatches silver bright.

Us was there, me an' Jane, 'pon a strange errand for sure, an' you may laugh if you'm pleased to; though there's nought to laugh at so far as I can see. You must know that if a blind-folded maiden plucks a rose 'pon midsummer night at the bell-stroke of twelve o'clock, there'll be found deep vartue in such a flower. So 'twas thought then; an' a wise woman—as be

[1] *Crumple lilies*—martagons.

dead now an' wiser still, I doubt—had told me how such a blossom, plucked at such a time, should be wrapped careful in white paper, an' hoarded away from the light, an' kept in a secret place till Christmas morning. An' then the maid as picked it would find her rose so fresh an' fair as 'twas six months afore. That is if she was to be a wife. Then she must set it on her bosom when she went forth; an' then 'twould prove a loadstone of power, an' draw—will he, nill he—the man as God had willed to be her master. 'Twould drag him to her against all fightin'; an' he would put out his hand an' take the rose from the gal, an' wi'in a year an' a day them two would be man and wife. Which things many folks believed most steadfast when I was nineteen.

That was our errand, then; an', no ways 'shamed, us stood there rayed in our night-shifts, wi' only the moon to see; and Jane, her blinded my eyes wi' a handkercher, and I done the like for her. Then us turned about once or twice, till in doubt where we was to, an' waited for the chimin' of the hour from the church. Presently it tolled out, an' 'pon the twelfth stroke us put forth our hands; an' Jane laughed, for she met a bud straightway; an' I hollered, for I pricked myself cruel an' touched nought but thorns. Yet I found a rose too, though I smarted for it; an' then us took the bandages off our eyes, an' went in the house, an' lighted a cannel, an' found as Jane had picked a white monthly rose, an' I'd got a red un. So we wrapped the flowers in silver paper an' stored 'em snugly away till Christmas. Half in jest, half in earnest, I reckon us was; but Jane hoped

least from her white rose, for she weren't much to see in the eyes of men. Only when a body comed to know her heart, the face of her growed into new meaning.

Time rolled along to autumn an' the fall of the leaf; an' nothin' much happened 'cept Enoch Dawe 'peared more tongue-tied than ever when along wi' me. Not that I should have taken any count of that, for us had our lives afore us; but I noticed that Jane an' him was growin' a bit close too. She never lost a chance of sayin' a word for the man, an' what 'peared terrible curious was that, though when along with me speech comed so hard with him that us would often walk a mile wi'out a word, yet to Jane he could talk so natural as a duck can swim. I growed a bit dark in my mind, but I couldn't tell even then what I thought about it; much less can I now, arter all these years. Jane, I reckon, was the best woman the world's ever showed me; yet, come winter, it set me shakin' to hear her praise Enoch Dawe noon an' night. For I'd growed to love the man by then, an' very like there'd have been bitter words between me an' Jane 'fore long. Only Christmas was a busy time, an' us didn't have much chance for quarrel.

'Pon Christmas Eve I was dog-tired, I mind, an' I went to sleep almost afore I'd got into bed. But 'twas as though I'd put a bit o' yarrow under my pillow, for I dreamed of Enoch Dawe that night—a gashly old dream as showed him to me coffined. Through the lid I could see un, tap, tap, tapping, an' calling out to my faither to stir hisself an' dig a grave for un. I woke wi' a scream, an' there was a light in the chamber, an'

Jane, who slept along wi' me, stood by my side and axed what was amiss.

"I was stirring," she said, "and you 'peared so onrestful and wisht that I was gwaine to wake 'e when you waked yourself. What's wrong with 'e?"

"Nought," I answered her—"nought but a bad dream."

She shivered, for 'twas a cruel, cold, starved Christmas that year, and blowed out the light and comed into my bed for warmth. Then us was soon asleep again, and I dreamed no more, good or ill.

Come marnin', what should Jane do but rise up and rummage in a old desk of gran'mother's where she kept her trinkets and treasures? But 'tweren't for some brooch or other adornment to brighten herself Christmas Day, for she took out from bottom of the desk her white rose; and I see'd her fingers shake a bit as she opened the paper. Then she gived a low cry.

"Withered up!" she said, "withered to nought but dust, my poor white rose!"

"Sarves you right for such foolishness," I told her, "and me too, for I lay my red rose be so fady as your white one. Ban't no magic left in the world now," I said, "because all the witches be dead this many a day, for sartain."

To tell 'e plain truth, I'd most forgot all about the rosen, and mine might have bided to the bottom of my box till crack o' doom for me; but now, seeing sister so set 'pon it, and not sorry to show her I was no better off than she, I turned the changes out of my box, and there, at the bottom, under a sprig or two of rosemary, as I'd put along with it, was the flower. I pulled

un out, opened the paper and—my stars! There was my red rose, sweet as June, fresh and butivul to see, wi' the very dew o' night 'pon un, same as in the moony hour of bygone midsummer when I picked un!

I thought I was dreamin' again till Jane spoke; but her words told me she see'd the same as me.

"You'm wrong," she said, keeping 'mazin' quiet; "there's magic in the world yet."

I took the rose to the grey daylight, and found as it were living leaf and petal, stalk and scent. A real blood-red rose; and biting frost 'pon all the earth, and ice inside our window-panes!

For a moment I was feared, and scared cruel. You see I minded the rest of the old tale, and it looked an awful thing to read the future by wearin' of un. A dark thing it looked to me, I do assure 'e. Weren't much better'n witch-craft, to my frighted thinking, and I 'most shivered when I remembered that so sure as I went out in the village wearin' of my rose, I should meet the man ordained to marry me. And if no man comed and took it, then I should bide a maid. So I was for burnin' the flower, though half in doubt as to what might hap if I throwed un in the fire; but Jane overbore me and spoke so strong 'pon it that I said as I'd do what she bade.

"You can't in reason go back now," she told me. " My flower be dead, and that shows there ban't no lover for me this year; but your red rose means a living, loving man I'll stake my life, and 'twill be flyin' in the very face o' Providence to set such a sign at nought. Wear the thing to church, come marnin' service; 'tis a charm for good, not evil, I promise 'e."

So I gived way, and set the rose in water till arter breaksis, and then, in a proper flurry, went off wi' Jane, prinked out in Sunday clothes wi' the flower 'pon my breast—throbbing to my heart's throb. I was so full o' myself that I fancied the whole world was lookin' 'pon my rose, and I shook like a leaf when any lad I knowed comed nigh me, and turned away from the males as though they was Red Injins. A mizmaze I was in—a terrible curious sensation—and the smell o' the rose in church most made me scream out more'n wance. Yet there 'twas, full an' fresh, sitting under my chin so calm and sweet as any flower what ever blowed in proper season, 'stead of a heathen bewitched thing as was picked six months afore and did ought by rights to have been dust and ashes long since with all the other flowers of the flown summer.

Comin' out o' church, I mind how Samson Chugg, the blacksmith, as was disposed to be soft where I was consarned, comes up and gives me joy o' the day; and I gathered myself to myself, as if the man had been a mouse or a beetle, and I said—

"You keep your distance, Samson Chugg!"

And he growed beet-red, naturally enough, 'fore such an ondacent speech, and said, "All right, all right, Mistress Spitfire. I wasn't gwaine to kiss 'e onder a lich-gate! Don't you give yourself such damn silly airs, just 'cause Heaven's given 'e graces!"

People laughed, and I could have cried to think of havin' made myself such a giglet afore all the bettermost folks of the parish. And I couldn't see Jane nowheres, nor faither neither, so just set off back-along so fast as my legs

would bear me. In a passion too, to mind what a fool I'd shown myself.

Then, gwaine up the lane from the village to where us lived in them days, I see'd a long man in Sunday black leanin' over a gate; and my heart went up in my mouth, for 'twas Enoch Dawe. He turned, and he see'd the rose. I know he see'd it, for 'twas shakin'; and I growed fainty like, and everything swimmed round in my eyes.

"Merry Christmas to 'e, Margery," he sez; "an' a Happy New Year, and plenty of 'em!"

"Thank you," I sez, my voice no bigger'n a hedge-sparrow's.

Then he made a sort o' sound, not speech—a gaspin' sort o' sound 'twas—an' put out a hand; an' my rose was gone.

"I must—I must do it!" I heard un say; then I comed over queer, and shut my eyes; and I reckon as I'd have falled in the hedge if he hadn't see'd I didn't. When I looked again, there the man was wi' my red rose between his teeth, an' his face matchin' the colour of it. He'd used both hands seemin'ly to hold me up, though one would have done.

"Don't say no—don't say no, Margery, my dear woman," he begs of me. "I'll be a good husband to 'e all the days o' my nat'ral life if you'll let me."

What could a gal do? But I just had sense to think of sister.

"'Tis Jane as you loves, I reckon, Enoch Dawe," I said.

An' he answered, all in one piece :

"Us conspired together against 'e, for I bein' so slow of speech couldn't face 'e; and I told

her how 'twas with me; and her minded that midsummer night; and 'twas her thought—solemn truth. She said as how you'd hoarded a red rose, and since 'tis the custom to force rosen for Christmas to Oakshotts—you can guess the rest. Her promised me as you'd wear it this marnin', and bade me pluck it from 'e, same as what I done. ''Twill make talk between 'e,' Jane said, 'and loose your lips.' An' so it have seemin'ly; for, God's my judge, I never spoke so much to man or maid afore in all my life."

Then he waited, wi' a world o' fear on his face, to see whether I'd take it kind or hard. And what wi' the upstore my heart was in, and the eyes of un, and the gude name he'd a-got, and the thought of sister, as had worked so clever unbeknawnst to bring it about—I took it kind.

IX

THE QUARRY

YOU MAY SAY there's only two kinds of people in the world, when you get to the bottom of human nature, and one kind be a thought too clever, and the others ban't quite clever enough. And for my part, being one of the second sort, I'd a long sight sooner neighbour with them than the first. There's lots of nice fools you can live with all your life and miss 'em when they've gone; for the Lord, well knowing which fashion of man is best for the world, chooses to build the staple of us with no more brains than we want; while as for the smart people, they are doubtless here to keep the simple ones awake—same as poultry have to learn that hawks fly in the air so well as starlings; and the coneys be reminded now and then, rather sharp, that there's such a creature as a fox.

And Samuel Rattery was the trustful, hopeful stamp of young fellow we all know, while his brother, David, favoured his dead mother and had a good brain and a tricky nature. But they clever people are often the pepper in our dish of life, and when William Rattery followed his wife to the grave and Samuel found himself master at Cleave Farm, he knew by experience

that his younger brother was going to be the pepper all right. And being a peace-loving sort of chap, who hated surprises and adventures, and only asked for things to go on without fret and change, he had a sort of idea, after his father was gone dead, that Cleave would be a far happier place, and more successful also, if David took himself elsewhere.

They all worked the farm together, with one or two hinds, while William lived, and Cleave being a freehold and long in the family, it had now fallen to Samuel, who was his father's eldest; but William hadn't forgot David, only, knowing his younger son parlous well, he'd left his portion in Samuel's keeping, and directed that Dave should have a yearly income so long as he worked to earn it, but no capital unless he left Cleave Farm and could show Samuel and Mr. Masterman, the lawyer, of a good investment where a bit of money might be placed to the young man's advantage.

Sam was twenty-seven when his father died, and David four-and-twenty, and the old man hadn't got the grass green on him before Dave was at his brother to raise his wages. He ordained for the present to bide at Cleave, where he was very comfortable; but he weren't content with two pound a week, which was what his father paid him, and when Samuel wouldn't give him no more until he worked a lot harder, David Rattery took it ill.

So there was a good bit of feeling between 'em from the start, and no parent left to back Samuel; while as for his aunt, old Ann Rattery, who looked after the farm indoors, she liked David best and always had done. He had a dashing

sort of way with him and some of the new ideas. He was more interesting than Samuel, who had no use for ideas, especially new ones. But the extra clever fellows always be more interesting than us simple chaps, because you never know what they'll do next; and to keep you guessing is the way to keep you interested—especially if you're a woman.

Besides, Dave happened to be mighty good-looking—the only Rattery that ever was in my memory. Tall, slim, with blue eyes, a clean-cut face, a firm chin and curly hair—russet as the dead fern—such was he; and a woman will do more for a real blue eye, even if it's shifty, than she will for most things. A pleasant voice he had also, and a laugh that sounded honest as a bell. In fact, you might say he was a very promising man all round, and the maidens thought a lot of him.

Samuel was different—a stuggy-built, go-by-the-ground fellow, with a plain and humble face, thatch the colour of old straw, and a kick in his voice. He weren't very clever, and he'd get very excited over nothing at all, and he had a nature prone to look on the dark side when there weren't no reason to do so. A nervous man, but good as gold, and couldn't have done a doubtful deed, nor over-reach a neighbour. He'd often go in and see sick folk for pure kindness, and even make journeys sometimes so far as Exeter to visit an old chap as had been a great friend of his father's and was now a bed-lier. But being what he was, the invalids always shivered in secret when he came to sit along with 'em, for they knew, poor souls, that Samuel weren't a ray of sunshine in a sick-room, but quite the contrary—

in fact, a bleak sort of man for one so young, and a sad man despite his fortunate fate. More comfortable at a funeral than a wedding any day of the week, and he didn't deny it.

Yet, nevertheless, in his steadfast way, Samuel now decided that he must have a wife to carry on the name of Rattery, and he cast about in his methodical fashion, and thought upon the Ilsington maidens, one by one, and settled that Jemima Snow might be the likeliest. She was terrible poor, the daughter of the sexton; but, money being no object to Samuel, he went for character, and guessed that, with such a bringing-up as Jemima had been called to suffer, she'd fetch a lot of sense to Cleave and make a thrifty and patient sort of wife. For Thomas Snow had been left a widow man at fifty years old, and to his eldest, Jemima, fell the task of keeping her father's house and bringing up a proper barrow-load of younger brothers and sisters.

Samuel reckoned she might not be sorry to find herself in her own home; but he weren't hopeful—he never was—and in his opinion one thing stood much against success. For Jemima chanced to be a terrible pretty girl. He knew that, because a score of people had told him so; but for his part he had no eye for beauty and weren't any judge of a woman's good looks. But he understood that the beauties set a higher price on themselves than the homely ones; and he reckoned that Jemima might think she was worth a better market than him.

He knew Jemima herself pretty well, but, always cautious, Sammy sounded her father first, and found the sexton very much on his side. For he was quite a catch in his small way, and

Thomas Snow looked forward and doubted not that if Jemima was fixed at Cleave there might be found good work there presently for some of his up-growing lads. So Jemima's father told Samuel to go on with it, and wished him luck.

But the very night that he heard the coast was clear, after supper, as he sat smoking along with his brother before going to his rest, a fearful shock came to Samuel, and it was his brother that gave it to him.

David, in his usual careless manner, plumped out the news.

"I be going to get married, Sam," he said, "and after that you'll have to find yourself with larger ideas, because, if I bring a wife to Cleave, things must be different and a bit more money come my way."

The other's jaw dropped and his eyes rolled. He looked at David, and he looked at his aunt, who was mending socks by the table, and then he said, "Oh!"

"Yes, 'Oh!'" replied David.

"And who might it be?" asked Samuel.

"Tommy Snow's daughter—Jemima, if I know anything," answered Dave.

And then, as if he weren't prepared to argue about it, he got up, knocked out his pipe, spat in the fire and went to bed.

"Have you heard about this, Aunt Ann?" asked Samuel, when he'd took it in. He was stuttering a lot, as he always did after a surprise, whether pleasant or the opposite.

"Nothing whatever," said the old woman.

For ten minutes they didn't speak, then old Miss Rattery made another remark:

"As he's the finest man in the parish and she's

the prettiest woman, it ain't no astonishment to me they've found each other," she said.

"It is to me," answered Samuel.

"Everything astonishes you," she replied.

"For this reason," he explained. "I was along with Mr. Snow but three hours agone—or it might be three and a half hours—and he'd heard nought about it."

"How do you know he hadn't?" she asked, puckering her eyes to thread a needle.

"Because I wanted to find out if he'd let me court Jemima myself, and he was very wishful for me to do so. In fact, he went so far as to hope I'd win her."

"The battle's to the strongest, then," said Miss Rattery.

"My God!" cried Samuel, excited in a minute. "'Twill be the house out of windows, Aunt Ann."

"Why for?" asked the old woman. "Haven't two brothers wanted the same woman afore to-day? If you can court her, so can David, and she may take one or t'other, or she may turn you both down; but the end of the world ban't likely to happen whatever she does."

You could never call her a comforting woman where Samuel was concerned, and he knew he'd get no help against David from her. That night he was very near minded to give up the job out of hand, and I dare say he would have done so; but chance willed that the very next day he fell in with Jemima herself trapsing up from the gamekeeper's cottage at Yarner Wood. John Barlow, the old keeper, had just ended his suffering life, and the Barlows were related to the Snows some way, so Jemima had dropped in to say they were sorry about it.

Now Samuel went along beside her and slowed his hoss to do so.

She was talking of poor old Barlow's poor old wife, and at another time the farmer would have been full of pity and off to see the widow in a minute; but at this moment he weren't interested in anything but Jemima herself. She was gracious and pleasant, and he adventured an offer for a walk, so as he might get to the bottom of the situation. So he asked her if she would go to the old quarry under Hey Tor Rock next Sunday, and come home-along to Cleave for a dish of tea after. And she was pleased, though not so surprised as he expected to see her.

"I'd like to do it," said Jemima—a dark girl with big brown eyes, a fine figure, long legs, and a mane of hair so black as a crow. "I've heard tell of the famous quarry all my life, and never yet found time to look at it."

"Don't you come, however, if 'tis pouring rain," said Samuel, and she said she would not.

Then he went further and asked a home question, and got an answer that made him stutter so as he couldn't speak for a full minute.

"Do you know my brother David?" he inquired.

"Only by sight," said Jemima. "He never comes down our way much—all for towns when he's free, I expect."

Samuel very near fell off his hoss at the thought of anybody so daring as to say he'd wed a maiden he didn't know. He couldn't believe that there was such a man in creation, let alone a Rattery.

He got his breath and presently said he must be going on. Then he rode off and left her, and

she looked after him with a good bit of wonder in her eyes.

But she kept her word, and when Sunday came Samuel went up to the old quarry, and saw Jemima waiting where they'd ordained to meet. It all fell very vitty, because the autumn afternoon was bright and fair, and David was out of the way. He had gone off for a Saturday till Monday with a friend to Plymouth, to see a football match and amuse himself after.

Hey Tor Quarry stood midway between Ilsington, far down in the vale below, and Cleave, on a hill near two mile distant northward, so as a half-way house it was all right, and Samuel, in his Sunday black, thought Jemima looked very fine. She wore a blue frock, with a bit of mole fur round her neck and a hat of the same.

To the quarry they went—a great gaping hole in the hillside, surrounded by broken cliffs of stone and having in the midst a pool so deep that you couldn't see near to the bottom, though the water was crystal clear. The pond filled all the old workings, and the place had been deserted for a hundred years. Only marks of the tamping iron here and there scored the rocks, or a rusty ring-bolt hung aloft in the stone. Little else showed sign of man. The cliffs were full of ferns and sapling thorn and ash on every ledge, and in the bottom, round the water, grew briars and foxgloves and such-like. 'Twas a place where ring-ousels came in spring to nest, and a patient man might sit here and hear their songs if he cared for such things.

Sam knew all about the quarry, and showed Jemima round and filled her with wonder.

"They do tell me," he said, "that the hugeous stones they took away from here was carried to London by ships over the Channel Sea and make the far famous London Bridge at this moment. 'Tis a great thought if true. And I'll tell you a greater. I read back-along in the newspaper that such a fearful thing be Free Trade that you can buy granite cheaper from Norway than you can from Dartymoor. Wouldn't you call that a sin and a shame in a Christian land?"

"So I would, then," said Jemima. "And have you ever been to London, Mr. Rattery?"

"'Samuel' to you," he answered. "And I never have been to London, and, please God, never shall go. Exeter's enough town for me. I be dazed there, along of the rail-trams and the rush and riot of the people. I never feel to draw enough air in my lungs when I go to they cities. 'Tis just the same at Plymouth, and by all accounts London would make a dozen of them; so how the London folk live at all I couldn't tell you."

"You go to Exeter, however?"

"Off and again—to see an old bedridden friend of my late father's. And I hope, as I tell him, that he'll be called to his reward soon, then I shan't go no more."

They got on very well together, and presently sat with their backs against a tall stone that rose up by the water. And then it come over Samuel, like a flame of fire, that it might be a terrible clever thing to cut courting and messing about, and dash at Jemima there and then! 'Twas just one of they excitable ideas you'd look for in him, and he felt tremendous sure that if, by good chance, the woman could see it in the same way,

he'd fly from the danger to come and get David down and out before the battle began.

Another man might have seen it was rather an ondacent thing to jump down the girl's throat like that, before he'd given her a chance to larn his character, or keep company in a proper and seemly fashion; but Samuel felt he knew her pretty well already, and he didn't doubt that Thomas Snow had given Jemima a hint or two of his high purpose. So, falling silent for a bit with his eyes on the water, he at last ordained to chance his luck and dash at her. She couldn't do no worse than turn him down, or else ask for time; so he let go and said as how she'd filled his mind for a good few months now, when he could spare thought to the subject, and that he was very wishful to start married life and couldn't but feel she'd find him a likely sort of man and able to offer her a home and comforts a bit above the common.

"I'm not much to the eye," he said, "and you're wonnerful fine and long ways prettier than any maiden I know about, but against my looks you'll have to set character and faithfulness; so, seeing that you are a cruel poor woman, with nought behind you and not much in front, it might be a fair bargain. And I do think you'd find yourself very happy and content at Cleave, and I'd be a very fortunate man, no doubt, if you'd take me."

She didn't speak for a minute—too surprised—and he flowed on again.

"Your father, I may tell you, would approve of it, and you'd be freer than you are now to enjoy yourself; for, though a poor hand at merry-making, I shouldn't deny you no fun in reason,

and your friends will always be my friends. So what d'you think?"

A good few had offered for Jemima in her time, but nobody quite like that, and something about Samuel's blunt way, or his silly eyes, or the catch in his voice, or maybe the thought of reigning at Cleave Farm, or the private opinion that, with such a simple sort of man, she'd be grey mare, or all these ideas rolled into one, helped to make up her mind for the girl. Of course, she knew from her father that it was coming, and she'd had five days to decide about it, and, as a matter of fact, she had decided. And, being a straight and downright sort of girl as knew the rough side of life exceeding well and the blessings of peace and security, she didn't pretend anything, but just spoke her mind. Deep in her young heart, I dare say, she'd have liked love to be a bit more romantic; but well she knew the romantic ones never had no money.

"We've known each other a long time," she began, "though not very well, of course; but everybody knows what you are, Mr. Rattery—'Samuel,' I should say—and I'd be a very fortunate woman to be your wife, I'm sure. Made of sense you are, and, if I ban't made of it, I'm too sensible anyway to say 'No' to a man like you. I expect we'll come to love each other very well indeed presently, and I'll take you if you really think I'm good enough."

"First rate!" said Samuel. "And very pleased I feel about it. I've trembled and sweated when I've thought of this job, Jemima, and I'd reckoned to walk out till next Lady Day, or longer, afore I put the question; but something about you drew it out as you see, like a poultice draws a

thorn. And I thank God that you feel addicted to me so soon. 'Twas beyond my highest hope, I assure you."

In ten minutes she was sitting on the man's knee, and in twenty they were off to Cleave, when Jemima let her eye run round the fine house-place as she drank tea, and Samuel, above himself for the first and last time in his life, babbled out to Aunt Ann how he'd seen and conquered.

"We'm tokened," he said. "Sure as you're sitting in that chair, Jemima have took me!"

The old woman was civil and no more. She didn't seem to believe it exactly, and looked at Jemima with a good bit of doubt; but the visitor upheld her nephew and said she could hardly credit such a great happening herself. "I must get home afore dusk be down and tell my father the wonderful news," she said.

Tea turned out rather a silent meal, and as he saw Jemima part of the way back, Samuel hoped that she wouldn't feel vexed by Aunt Ann's frosty manners.

"Us have all got to remember that she had a cruel stroke of ill-fortune in her young days," he explained, "ànd us, who be so amazing fortunate in love seemingly, must be patient with her. Because, when she was a young woman, a gipsy told her that she'd live to have her grandchildren and her great-grandchildren at her grave, and she believed it, and hoped against hope for a husband till she was forty-five years old; and then hope died, as well it might, and she turned sour as rhubarb from that time onward. My father have told me that she was quite cheerful and pleasant to live with till the last chance failed her, and then she changed."

"Didn't nobody ever offer for her?" asked Jemima, a good bit interested in such a fatal tale.

"No," said Samuel, "not a soul; though in her late thirties she'd have took anything."

So the news went round next day that pretty Jemima Snow was tokened to Sammy Rattery, and all agreed that it looked a very fair bargain; for even if such a bowerly maid was thrown away upon the farmer, what he had got to offer wouldn't be thrown away on her.

And if Samuel had struck while the iron was hot and stood out for a marriage so soon as the banns could be run through, it might all have gone merry as a ring of bells; but that's where the silly nature of the man threw him. He must needs have a long engagement, he said, so as they should get to know each other's weaknesses, and he ordained that round about next March, after six months were passed, would be a very clever time for the wedding.

It went all right, and the one fear of Samuel apparently proved vain, for so far as he could see, when his brother David got to know about it, he behaved so well as anybody might expect. He hid his heart, no doubt, but he kept his nerve, and when he came to know Jemima, a few days after the match was made, he seemed to play a future brother's part, and carried on very properly.

And Jemima and Samuel walked out of a Sunday and met of a week-day, when convenient, but Samuel never cared over-much for childer, so he was better pleased for his sweetheart to come to him than to go to her, among the flock of little Snows. But love her he certainly began

to do, and presently, much to his surprise, he found she was growing to be the apple of his eye.

She brought him out something wonderful, and improved him in a lot of ways. She made him dress nicer and take a cheerfuller conceit of himself and a brighter view of life in general, and this he actually did do after six weeks of Jemima. In fact, he got to know his luck and appreciate it. Her voice became to him the best thing in nature, and for her part she was quick to see his good points, and feel the trustworthy qualities of the man were worth more in the long run than a handsomer and cleverer partner with more to hide.

So it all looked right as rain for 'em, and then came the crash. It happened a bit after Christmas, just when the great cold snap fell on Devon, and we got a frost beyond living memory that lasted into April very near.

Samuel had been up to Exeter again, and he fetched Jemima a tokening ring with a real jool in it. A silver ring it was with a pale pink stone, and the watchmaker what he'd bought it from said it was an Italian ruby, and nobody could say it weren't. But a week after she'd got it, Jemima sent it back to Samuel with the fearful news that all was over between 'em, and she had no more use for him at all.

On a bitter black morning in January he heard it, and the poor soul felt as if the bottom had fallen out of life. Thinking at first that there must have happened some catastrophe to Jemima and she'd took leave of her senses, he dashed off to Ilsington; but he didn't see her; he saw her father, and soon found the man sided against

him and never wanted to see him no more. Terrible things Samuel heard; and he came away with his tail between his legs, no doubt, for so far as he could see he must be mad himself and his world all turned upside down.

"One word will do for a thousand in a matter of this sort," said old Snow, short and sharp. "We've got to know the truth about you and your ways at Exeter, Samuel Rattery, and, though we might have pardoned you if you'd confessed all and turned from evil, to think you've deceived Jemima and me, and carried on with your wickedness while engaged to marry her, be a shameful scandal. I'll name but one name to you, and then you'll see I'm telling truth and nothing be hid. And that name is 'Bella Bellamy'—so now then!"

Thomas Snow seemed to think that Samuel would drop through the earth when he heard that, but he only stared with empty wonder.

"And who the mischief be Bella Bellamy?" he asked. "God's my judge, but I never heard tell of no such woman."

"Don't you dare to take the Name!" roared Snow in great indignation. "Now you be adding hateful lies to your other sins. For let me tell you, when I heard of this horror I wouldn't believe it myself till I went to Exeter, and saw the woman with my own eyes, and heard how she have been your close friend for years. No better than she ought to be—the creature—but a saint compared to you."

So Samuel went his way and hung over a gate presently and watched the plovers running round the corn-ricks, for the cold had drove 'em down from the Moor into the valleys. He was beat,

of course, and had no idea whatsoever as to the truth.

A stronger man might have took the thing by the throat and got to the bottom of it, but, though he tried to do something, he was faced with silence and sour looks, and found that them who cared anything about him felt the less said the better. Nobody much was sorry for him seemingly, for the story was believed; but when he tried to find who had started it none could tell him. A proper outcast the poor soul found himself; he pretty well despaired, in fact, and his weak wits turned against him, for he soon found that life without Jemima was a mighty different thing from what she'd made it. And to discover the people believed him a proper bad man, whose only pride had always been to know how good he was—that came as a facer too. Because, in sober truth, the whole plot against him had not a shadow behind it. Never was a straighter chap; he'd not looked at a girl in his life before he saw Jemima, and to play about with a female was outside his nature.

He wilted under his misfortune, and when he found nought would change Snow, who was a most strict and God-fearing person, Samuel began to despair. He wrote thrice to Jemima, and the letters was sent back unopened, and then he tried to get his Aunt Ann to fight for him, but she refused and said she believed the fearful story, and had always thought Samuel had got a bit up his sleeve; while as for David, he pretended to be sorry for his brother, but he didn't pretend to believe him.

It was all too much for the master of Cleave. His disgrace and his loss touched his brain, and

instead of doing what a better and a stronger chap would have done and fighting the thing out and getting to the bottom of it if it cost him his last penny, he threw up the sponge after a month, and said there was some unknown devil working against him and that he was a ruined man.

He couldn't eat and he couldn't think, and his poor head throbbed night and day, and the bitter cold weather, no doubt, played a part in casting him down and robbing him of his will and strength. There was none to care for the wretch, or help him against the blackguard who had planned the plot to smash him up, and things went from bad to worse with Samuel till he lost hold on reality, so to speak, and began to wonder whether he wouldn't do well to get out of it and find peace in the grave.

It all sounds silly to tell about, because 'tis hard to look into the man's mind, or think any fellow-creature could be so simple as to suffer his wrongs in silence and see no way out; but that was Samuel, and the time came presently when the little good he ever saw in life was gone. The one thing that had happened to him to make him hopefuller with existence was torn away, and he reached a state when, firstly, he didn't want to live no more, and secondly, he decided he wouldn't live no more. The fearful thought grew upon him till he was resolved to put himself out, and there came a night when he set forth to do it.

He turned over many ideas to take his life, and finally decided to go by water. He'd always hated firearms and the sight of blood, so he ordained to creep up to the quarry pool and end his days where he'd had his one great pinch of happiness, when Jemima took him there.

He hadn't been near the place since, save once with her, before she chucked him, but it seemed a happy thought to Samuel that he should die there.

"And may she live to know the bad thing she's done," prayed he.

Out he went after supper on a moony night and the frost so sharp as ever; and his Aunt Ann told David that Sam looked to be out of his mind and might soon have to be put away, and David, who had his own troubles, said the sooner the better.

And then a strange thing happened if eye of man had been able to see it, for up from Cleave to the quarry came Samuel through the white moonlight, and up from Ilsington to the quarry came Jemima Snow. But whether they was both there to do the same terrible act time would show.

Anyway, Samuel got to the place long before the woman, and, but for the watching Lord, he'd have been so good as his word and at the bottom of the pool before she stood beside it; but, silly as ever, the poor soul quite forgot that the earth had been froze to the bone for six weeks, and when he reached the water he found a foot of ice on it and every yard of the pond so hard as a high road. All hoar and still was the silent place, and the moon making the granite glitter, and many a long beard of icicles hanging round about the precipices up over Samuel's head.

He stamped on the steely face of the ice till the rocks echoed round about, and he lost his temper and screamed out, like a bleating sheep: "Oh, my God, be I never to have no luck?"

"No luck!" said the echo to Samuel; but 'twas a lying echo, for now, at the darkest hour

of his fortunes, his Maker willed that the unfortunate zany should be saved alive.

He squatted down by the great stone where Jemima had promised to marry him, and his thoughts was in a miz-maze wondering what to do next. And then, if he didn't see the source of all his troubles, for there, in the moonlight, came Jemima slipping through the quarry with quick feet, and the steam coming through her lips from her panting bosom as she hastened along.

At first he thought she was a phantom creature woke out of his brain; but he soon heard her shoes ringing on the stones and saw she was solid enough; and then he thought maybe some dreadful thing had drove her to do what he had meant to do, and wondered what her idea might be for getting out of it. But he was quite mistook there also; for she was not going to waste no time in the quarry, and weren't at all the sort to shorten her days whatever happened. Then, as she slipped along, Samuel saw she could only be heading for one place, and that was Cleave Farm; so he rose up from the rock as she passed him and she heard his poor voice hoot out—like an owl with a cold on its chest.

She stopped as if she was froze, and they stared at each other, and the moon was light enough for him to see her unhappy face and for her to mark that the man looked so grim as a ghost.

Jemima kept her nerve best, and when he'd challenged her, she answered:

"Yes, it is me, Samuel. And what—what the mischief are you doing here at this time of night?"

"Looking at the ice," he said. "And what be you up to, for that matter?"

"I'm a wicked girl," answered Jemima. "A very fearful thing have happened, and I can't rest in my bed till I've spoke to you, and I was coming to do it this minute. And if you can't forgive me, Samuel, I shan't blame you, for I deserve it all."

He stared at her, and saw there were tears in her eyes. But her voice was so beautiful as ever in his ear.

"We can't stand still, because it's a thought too cold," he replied to her. "But if you've got anything to say, you can say it while I walk down along to your home with you."

"That'll do very nice," she answered.

And then, in fits and jerks, she told her tale.

"It's like this," she said. "Your brother David's a devil, and didn't ought to be allowed. A wickeder man never walked this earth, and it's him, all unknown to you, that have come between us and made me do what I did do."

"I thought 'twas somebody by the name of Bella Bellamy that had come between us," he answered. "All I know, so far, is that your father have told me I'm philandering with a female at Exeter, and he've seen the woman and won't have me inside his house no more."

"Listen, for God's love," she begged him. "Listen to every word, and then judge me. Of course, after you and me was engaged, I felt to David as if he was a brother, and he never done anything by word or deed to make me guess the villainy of the man. And when I met him walking a bit ago—just after you'd give me my ring—I showed it to him, and he laughed and he said: 'You ain't the first to wear that ring, Jimmy.'"

"Your name's 'Jemima,' I believe," said Samuel.

"So it is, then; but he calls me 'Jimmy.' And I said: 'Whatever do you mean, David?' And he said: 'Why, that's the self-same ring he gave to Bella Bellamy to Exeter!' I stared at him and said: 'What be chittering about? I never heard of no Bella Bellamy. Samuel goes to Exeter to see an old friend of his father's. He ain't got no other friends there. He hates the place.' David seemed a good bit vexed with himself then. He agreed with me and bade me forget what he'd spoke. But it weren't very likely I should do that, and I didn't want no second-hand rings you'd gived to other girls."

"May God open the ground under my feet if I ever heard of Bella Bellamy till your father named the creature," said Samuel.

"I know that now; but I didn't then, and I took the story straight to father. He's a very stern man about behaviour, and he was coming to you instanter, and I wish he had; but that same night David dropped in, to ask me to put the matter out of my mind, and father tackled him and got it out of him that you had a girl at Exeter and was leading a double life. And this is what the wicked man said. He said that for such an accusation proof was before all things needful, and he begged father to come up to Exeter and see the girl for himself. 'She goes on in the crowd in the Exeter pantomime,' said David to father, 'and a man friend of mine knows her, and if you want to be sure of your ground with my beastly brother'—meaning you, Samuel —'I can confront you with the girl!' And father had business in Exeter himself two days later, so he ordained to go up with David. And he did so and met Bella Bellamy—a great, hum-

mocking girl, in showy clothes she never paid for, and a mane of gold hair as come out of a bottle—the gold I mean. And she swore—swore, mind you—that she'd been your friend for years. And father put a few questions to catch her; but she knew all about you, and he saw it must be true. And who shall blame him?"

"I wish I may die——" began Samuel; but she told him to be quiet.

"Listen, and talk after," she said, and then went on with her tale.

"Of course father had no choice but to put it across you when he heard these things, and I had no choice but to drop you and send back your ring. And so it happened, and what you felt I don't know, but what I felt put on ten years to my life. Because I'd got to love you with all my heart by then. And after that another dreadful thing happened, and David, so cunning as a snake, began to make love to me! And, God forgive me, I listened to him, because he've got a pleasant voice and knows how to talk to a girl and was terrible sorry for my trouble. But never, never would I have took the wretch, for all the time, Samuel, something deep in me, which was no doubt the still small voice they tell about, kept warning me against the man.

"And then—this very morning, Samuel—me and father went to Exeter, sent by the watching Lord no doubt, and the end of the fearful adventure happened. As we was walking down High Street looking in the shop windows, I heard somebody speak, and saw a great, bold, dashing creature come up to father and pat him familiar on the shoulder. 'You'll be Mr. Snow, I do think,' the girl said, and father, who never

forgets a face, and weren't likely to forget hers, turns round upon her. 'Don't you touch me, if you please,' he says to her. 'Yes, I am Mr. Snow, and you be Miss Bella Bellamy, and we don't want no truck with you, anyway.'

"She looked at him and then at me and seemed inclined to say something rude and leave us—a proper play-actress you could see by the way she held up her head and her way of going and her finery. But she changed her mind and turned to me. 'Was you the young person that was to marry David Rattery's brother?' she asked, and father said: 'Yes, she was, and thank God you let her out.' 'Well,' she answered, 'don't put on no frills, old boy, and I'll tell you something to interest you.' And then she did tell us something to interest us, and 'twas such an amazing piece of news that, before we left the woman, father had forgiven her for her crimes, and so had I."

"And what was her crimes, then?" asked Samuel, a good bit excited by now.

"She knew David very well indeed," continued Jemima, "and had known him a longful time; but, of course, she didn't know you—never. But his game was to get up a plot with her against you, so as your visits to Exeter should be explained, and she was ready to do anything for a bit of fun and a bit of money—especially the money. He told her just exactly what you was like, down to the kick in your speech, and larned her what to say, and then he plotted to overthrow you and bring father up to listen to Miss Bellamy's lies. And being a play-actress, of course they sounded like truth, as she knew well how to make 'em.

"But as father said, coming home: 'The mills

of God grind slow, but small,' and since that wicked affair she'd fallen out with David; because, now she'd done what he wanted, he'd cooled off a lot, and she thought he might be after somebody else. She wouldn't have done nothing about it, having plenty to think of in her doubtful manner of life at the theatre and all; but seeing father brought it back to her and, on the spur of the moment, she stopped him and gave the show away, to get even with David. And that's all there is to it, Samuel, and I couldn't have closed my eyes to-night till I'd seen you and asked you to forgive me. Of course you won't take me now—I well know that, and so does father. 'Tis beyond Christianity to ask such a thing. But if you can see your way to forgive me, being such a forgiving sort as you are, I shall bless your name so long as I live."

Samuel didn't answer very quick. He thought for a bit and then he said: "Now I'll ax you to say it all over again from the beginning, Jemima; because such a dark and devilish tale as this can't be understood at one telling."

Well, 'twas hateful for the girl to do that, because you don't feel like saying a long story all over again after you've worked yourself up same as she had. But she went at it once more, and, being the solemn truth in every particular, it come out just the same second time, and even worse. And by then they was at her home.

"I won't come in," said Samuel; "but I'll very likely step down-along and see you and your father to-morrow, Jemima. And I forgive you, and as to the rest I'll turn it over."

Well, knowing him, she slept pretty comfortable, and when he got home, Sammy found his

brother hadn't gone to bed, but was poking about, anxious like, waiting for him to return. 'Twas very near two o'clock in the morning by then. And David didn't hide a disappointed look when his brother came along.

"What be you doing down house?" asked Samuel.

"Waiting for you," said Dave. "I half hoped you'd gone and killed yourself perhaps—such a mournful wretch you be nowadays and good for nought."

"No," answered Samuel, "I ban't the sort of man to kill myself, I believe, and we'll see who'll be the mournful wretch to-morrow. And this I may tell you for you to sleep on, that your wicked friend to Exeter have confessed all. Her name being Miss Bellamy by all accounts. And if you don't take your money, so soon as I can find it, and leave this place for a foreign land in two months from now, I'll lock you up with the rogues where you belong."

David made a lot of noise after that, and Miss Rattery poked her head down from top floor; but Samuel drew himself half a pint of beer and scorned the pair of 'em.

It all fell out very comfortable just like that; for when his sin was known David found it might be better to make a new start. He got five hundred pounds of his father's money, and went to Canada with it, to take up State-aided land; and Samuel had Jemima back—but not in no great hurry—and wedded her next Eastertide. She never seemed to settle down exactly comfortable at Cleave, however, till old Ann Rattery died, a year or two later. Then she came out from behind a cloud and grew so happy as a heath-lark.

X

THE CURSE

WHEN SOLOMON BLIGHT killed his wife a good few people in Daleham took a dislike to the man; because, though sometimes, when a wife goes off sudden, the folk may feel they can forgive the husband pretty easy, in the case of poor Minnie Blight they could not. There's some murders you don't get hanged nor yet locked up for, and Solomon didn't use no hatchet to his poor girl, nor put poison in her tea, nor nothing like that. What he done was to break her heart, all lawful and regular, and bring her down and down by hard words and unseen cruelty till she didn't want to go on living no more. And at two-and-thirty she died what doctors call a natural death. Glad to go, so she told a woman friend or two who kept with her to the last; and her only remaining care was her little boy, six year old or thereabout.

And old Mrs. Mogridge, generally known as 'Mother Moggs,' promised Minnie that she'd do what she could to try and get little Billy Blight away from his father after she was took.

You may say that Minnie paid with her life for the one error of her life; because when Solomon Blight came courting her, she fell in

love with his fine appearance, and wouldn't believe her parents, who'd always begged and prayed of her to give him up. He had his own boat, and in them days did well enough and kept sober most times; but his record was bad—he'd been in gaol more'n once for fishing in restricted waters, and once he'd hit down a coast-guardsman who catched him, and broke the officer's arm.

A big, swarthy chap was Solomon, bold as a hawk and no better to be trusted. 'Blueskin' everybody called him, because his chin and his cheeks, which he shaved clean, were blue. But his hair was black and his eyes were dark and savage-looking, and he had a mouth like a dogfish. He hung on to Minnie, whose parents were very well to do, because he guessed they'd come round after their daughter was wed; and she also believed they would relent, and so she fell in with his scheme, poor fool, and ran away and married the man, in a North Devon port, while his trawler was round land fishing the North Channel.

But Blight reckoned without Farmer Bassett and his wife, for they disowned Minnie afterwards, said she was no longer child of theirs, and they never lifted a finger to her no more. They knew what she was suffering too, because so soon as Solomon found out her people had done with her he turned on Minnie and treated her very wicked indeed. But such was the hardness of her father's heart to his own flesh and blood that she couldn't get forgiveness, and old Bassett wouldn't let his wife help the poor girl either.

The feeling of the public, however, was made clear to 'em rather painfully when Minnie went to her rest; for the night that followed the sad

creature's funeral witnessed a bit of a flare-up in Daleham. 'Twas Saturday, and a good lot of fishermen had come home for the week-end as usual; and a bit after closing time, when the Red Admiral and the Sailors' Welcome and others had emptied, a few bold chaps smashed all the windows in Sol Blight's cottage front, and a dozen others went up over to Bassett's farm on the cliffs, fired a rick, and did one or two other lawless deeds—just to show they didn't hold with the way farmer and his wife had looked on and watched 'Blueskin' snuff out their only daughter.

Altogether a very shameful affair, and a bad mark against Daleham all round; but I never heard that anybody shed no tears about it; and the local police, though so clever as most men in their calling, didn't hurt themselves trying to catch the evildoers. In fact, not a man among 'em ever was catched, though old Bassett offered five pounds for information of the offenders.

'Blueskin' was drunk the night after they buried Minnie, and by good chance Mrs. Mogridge had took his little son to her home for the night, so he weren't frightened by the window-smashing. She thought, of course, that Billy's father would be only too glad to get rid of him; but she was wrong there, for the stubborn man swore he was going to keep his son and make a fisherboy of him. He dared anybody to take the child away, and the law upheld him in that matter; but when he made an enemy of Mother Moggs, it was agreed by all that he'd done a foolish deed, because the old woman had a will of iron; and more than that: she was reckoned to know a bit more than most, and believed to

have secret ways of getting even with them who crossed her.

She had got old and shaky when Mrs. Blight died, but her blue eyes could see through a millstone yet, and she knew human nature inside out. It was said she had put a murrain on Farmer Bassett's cattle long ago; and when Solomon Blight lost his trawl thrice in a year few doubted but that Mother Moggs had worked it, for I'm telling of a time more than half a century past, when people believed a lot more than they'll hold to nowadays. And so Mrs. Mogridge had a doubtful reputation in some quarters, and 'Blueskin' hated her very hearty indeed; and when she came before him with proposals to take Billy off his hands he insulted her shocking, and spoke evil to her and told her that if ever she laid a finger on his child he'd strangle her.

"You'm a baggering old witch," said Solomon, "and if you had your rights you did ought to be ducked in the harbour and burned after; and if I catch you near my son, or trying to overlook me or do any harm to my boat, I'll take the law in my own hands against you."

She kept her temper with the coarse creature, and tried to get parson to help her; but none could do nought, for the law was on Sol's side, and so soon as Billy's father found the general opinion ran that the child should be took away from his keeping he swore it shouldn't happen. And it didn't happen. But then fell out the deep, strange thing that made talk for many months and was the subject of such wonderful arguments at the Red Admiral and the Sailors' Welcome. It even got into the newspapers also—a thing Daleham don't often do. I never heard no such

tale afore myself, and I'm sure don't want to listen to another like it; but far the most curious part for me is that I was in the thick of it myself, yet never knowed the fearful rights of the story till long years after.

There came a winter evening, and Solomon Blight, who always worked hard enough when he wasn't drunk, ordained to go out to the Devil's Rocks and try for conger-eels. The Rocks lie a mile and a half to westward of Daleham Harbour, and more than one well-found sailing craft in my time have met her fate there; while in old days they tell me a ship was cast away upon 'em pretty near every year. But inside the ridge be a proper wonnerful place for conger, and sometimes between whiles, when the big trawlers are in harbour and nothing much doing on the deep sea for four-and-twenty hours, men will pull rowing-boats out to the rocks, if the weather allows, and try their luck.

Conger, like pollock and other fish, be best in winter, and a pollock till he have got his winter coat on after October ban't worth eating, in my judgment. So, on a still even in December, just as the reds was in the sky and Daleham's windows all afire in the sunset, 'Blueskin' and the mate of his trawler, *The Night Hawk*, ordained to put in a few night hours behind the Devil's Rocks. Their dinghy was at the quay side, and Johnny Tapper, Sol's mate, had got the fishing lines and gear for his partner and was talking to a few men loafing under the lighthouse.

The sun went down and night came fast, but still 'Blueskin' didn't show, and Johnny was just going in to the Welcome up the quay to find him, when he see the other man come out. Sol

braced himself as he smelt the fishy air, but t'other saw he'd had more than enough. He could carry a lot of drink, however, and John knew that, once he was in the boat, he'd be all right.

Then there happened what might have been an ugly accident, for just as Solomon started to get his legs in order there comed an old woman past him. 'Twas Mother Moggs, and she glowered at the man and spit on the ground, which she always did do when she passed him. In his anger at her insult he forgot his balance, and afore she could get clear he lurched against her. Both was on the quay at the time, and of course the woman, light as a dead stick, went heels over head when 'Blueskin's' twelve stone touched her. She fell anyhow, and her stick flew out of her hand as she dropped within inches of the quay edge. Only a bollard saved her falling ten feet into deep water.

"That'll larn you to spit at me, you hen devil!" shouted the fisherman.

Then he tried to go on, but Mother Moggs was up in a moment and barred his way. Her blue eyes flashed and her old jaw worked, and she spat in earnest now, like a savage cat, and breathed out fire and fury on the man.

"You murdering, drunken wretch!" she screamed. "To Hell with you—to Hell with you, where you belong! Go—get out to sea, you hateful dog! Get out to sea and throw your line and catch your death, Solomon Blight! Throw your line and catch your death!"

A child had picked up her stick, and the furious old creature snatched it and clattered off, while 'Blueskin,' a bit sobered, stared after her, and

a few men laughed at him. But Johnny Tapper didn't laugh. He was a religious man, and very steady and straight, and he believed that there might be a good deal more to the old woman's cussin' than his partner thought. In fact, John went so far as to advise 'Blueskin' that he'd best not go to sea.

"A cuss is a cuss," he said. "There may be nothing to it, and, again, there may be a darned sight more to it than you think for. You'll be better ashore, anyway, to-night."

"Shut your mouth and come on!" answered Sol.

But Tapper wouldn't shut his mouth, nor yet come on.

"You'll do as you please," he answered; "but if you go to sea to-night, you'll go alone. 'Throw your line and catch your death,' that's what Mother Moggs screamed at you; and if you catch your death, then, supposing I was along in the boat with you, I'd very like catch mine too. And I ain't taking no chances—a man with a wife and family!"

"You're a tea-swilling coward, and I've done with you," said 'Blueskin.' "I'd have thought you had more manhood in you than to be feared of an old mangy monkey like her."

Then he went down the steps and got into his boat, while Johnny replied to him.

"You know very well I'm no coward," he told t'other. "If you call home what happened to *The Night Hawk* coming round the Wolf Light last March, you'll remember I ain't no coward; but a cuss is a cuss, and I ban't going fishing to-night with you, whether or not. And you're a fool to go yourself."

Some as heard sided with Johnny, and some

did not; but nought would make him budge or change his mind, and, after a good bit of crooked language against Tapper, Solomon Blight dipped the oars and pulled his dinghy out through the harbour heads to the west.

The last of the dimpsy light was on the ocean by now, and the Devil's Rocks ran like a row of black and broken teeth sticking out of a rose-coloured sea. But the light soon faded away and the stars came out; and so still was it on the famous conger grounds that you could hardly hear the whisper of the water round the rocks.

Sol was steady and sober by this time, and he soon made fast inside the ridge, where ran a good ten fathom of water under him. Then he baited his hooks with cuttle-fish. To brass wire the hooks were bent, for a conger will bite through the stoutest line ever wove of hemp.

So he set to his fishing while darkness came down, but not a breath in the air, nor scarce a ripple on the water. 'Blueskin' lit his pipe, dropped his lines fore and aft, and turned his thoughts ashore to Johnny Tapper. So far he felt no fear of the angry old woman's nonsense; but as he cooled down and the drink faded out of his head he minded her wrath, and the wicked look in her blue eyes, and the doubtful name she'd got for being cleverer than her neighbours.

The western sky faded to a dusky green over the sea and land; and then, out of the east, a dim shadow rose up and presently sailed aloft and flung down flakes of light upon the sea. 'Twas the moon, and 'Blueskin' always reckoned that a frosty and moony night together found the black congers, which dwelt amid the fangs of the rocks, at their hungriest.

A little schooner, *The Morning Star*, had run on the reef in a gale during the last spring, and three men and a boy were drowned there; so the great eels were man-eaters very like. "And if they'd eat one man, they'd eat another," thought Sol suddenly. It gave him a bit of a shiver, I dare say; but he put the cuss behind him, lighted his lantern, and presently began to catch some heavy fish. For seven hours, however, nothing bigger than a six-pound conger came to the man's hooks, and he began to consider going home. But then, just as all fear had passed off and he was only aware of a great new thirst upon him, the proper, dark business of the night began.

Then it was that, like an echo from nowhere, the cuss came back to Sol. Nobody spoke it—not a bird flying, nor a wave beating, nor yet the night wind in the great rocks, but none the less he heard it: "Throw your line and catch your death!"

"Damn the hag!" shouted Sol aloud; and there came back a live echo this time, for off the face of the stone sounded back the words clean and clear. "Damn the hag!" said the rocks. And a minute after that a gentler sound came over the sea, for Daleham church clock told midnight, and the bells rang out 'Rock of Ages,' as they always did at that hour. A tramp steamer went up Channel three miles out, and Sol heard the chug of the screw; and then he heard something else. The line at his bows gave a sharp twang, like a banjo string, and he felt it whipping and throbbing in the water. That was the pleasantest music of all for him, and he jumped forward in his skiff to handle the line. And then he found a proper, tremendous strain upon it, and a great,

unknown creature fighting so heavy and so strong as if it would tow the boat.

From that moment Sol forgot the cuss as though he'd never heard it. He was all fisherman now, and thought of nothing but the huge fellow below. Money was down there—live money—but not to be counted upon till he'd played his part and got it in his boat and knocked the great sea-snake's life out of it.

For he knew from the first it was a black conger. Big flat fish, however large they run, don't make such a business of being caught as the giant eels. Congers be the tigers of the Channel, in fact, so Sol knew he was in for a fight. And a fight there was—a proper pull-devil, pull-baker under the moon, with the great rocks flinging back the noise. For a time 'Blueskin' could make no impression whatever on his fish, and he guessed the creature had wound itself round rocks beneath, to resist the pull from above; but a steady strain told at last; the line shot away and cut his hand through its horny skin as it did so. He soon gripped it again and knew the eel was up. Once get it off the bottom, then, if his gear held, the end was only a question of time, so he reckoned.

But every foot of that line meant a tussle, and presently the man made fast round a seat to rest a minute. As he did so his hemp sang again, and he heard a mighty splash, and knew the conger was on top for a look round. He hauled in the slack so fast as he was able, and when the great fish tried to dive once more it found it couldn't. So it fought and lashed out and beat the water till it boiled; and Sol heard the grunt of it, so loud as a pig.

Still he didn't know what he was in to, and felt no pang of fear; but presently, when the creature was near enough, he got his lantern and lifted it high to see if he could sight it. Then suddenly it churned almost alongside, and in the smother of broken water, red with the lantern light and white under the moon, he saw something that curdled his innards and made him very near drop his light.

All in a blaze and fighting like a proper demon was a thing that wound and knotted and writhed and looked full twenty feet long! The lantern and the moon flashed over it—a black conger, sure enough, but such a conger as neither 'Blueskin' nor any other Daleham man had ever seen—a proper demon fish, bred in the deep sea caves and Lord knew how old.

For a moment Mother Moggs's cuss came into Sol's mind, and he felt mighty like cutting his line and letting the monster go—if it would. But his fight was more than half fought, and his blood was up, and he told himself not to be a white-livered fool and chuck away a ton of good money at an old woman's threat.

The fish floated now, stretched out and motionless like a tree in the water; so he took his time, got his gaff ready and an axe from the locker. Then he coaxed the great dusky thing nearer and nearer. It came in slow and heavy, like a long black spar, and, thinking it exhausted, Sol waited until its length rolled beside the boat; then he steadied himself, and finally stabbed in the gaff, deep and hard, half a foot below the gills. He meant to hold it in this fashion with his right hand while he beat in its head with his left holding the axe. That done, he'd be able to

drag the monster aboard; but there were two to this plan, and the eel, fairly gaffed, went mad, and showed a bit more of its tremendous power. It began to resist again with every inch of its carcass, and the line, catching in a thole-pin, snapped like a cotton thread.

Another minute and Sol would have lost him; but 'twas now or never, so he held on to the gaff with both hands, put all his great strength to one effort, and lifted the head and belly of the conger clear of the sea. At the same minute the rocking of the boat sent the lantern overboard, and the gaff, unequal to such a strain, snapped short, while the fisherman fell backwards into the well of his craft. But five feet of the conger had come too. Its tail followed the head and body, and the whole great, slithering creature fell atop of 'Blueskin,' coil on coil.

He felt a ring, so cold as ice, tighten about his leg then, and he heard a hissing in his ear and listened to the tail of the brute lashing now one side, now the other, as if it would stave in the ribs of the boat. He tried to get a grip on its body between his hands, but the fish was a lot too slippery and too strong for that. It twisted and wriggled and beat him over the neck and face and seemed to throw a coil round every limb; then, struggling to rise and get clear, the man put his hands upon its head, and it fastened like a rat-trap on his fingers and bit him to the bone.

Blight swore then, and hit out madly while the fish still quivered and writhed round him in black festoons, and made strange ugly sounds, as though cussing back in its own language. If the monster had happened to have had a spoonful of brains it could have killed 'Blueskin' all right,

but the Lord have denied such fantastic creatures more wits than enough to keep 'em safe in their own homes, and the fisherman knowed now that if he only kept his nerve and his temper he must come out on top. He fought clear presently, bruised and bleeding, and slobbered with cold slime from his face to his boots. He'd had a blow across the eyes that very near blinded him, and he was shaking with such a passion of rage that he could hardly steady his hands to feel for a match. But the conger was off him, down in the bottom of the boat for a minute, and Sol pulled himself together, while his craft got to an even keel again and the echoes of his swear words died upon the rocks.

For a minute all was still as the grave, and then the chap got a match burning and found his little axe forward in the bows. But he kept his eye turned over his shoulder the while lest the creature should attack from behind. Then he struck another match and held it above him, and then he marked the great eel in the bottom of the boat coiled up with a proper tangle of ropes and fishing lines and an overturned bait-can and scraps of white squid thrown everywhere, shining like silver money under the moon.

He could see the enemy's great head now, glaring up wicked and watchful out of the mess. It was gasping and its gills opening and shutting like a sluice, and its snout and sides were bloody from the stroke of the gaff. And he saw its round eyes like balls of fire, but he said after that there was only fear in the conger's face now—terror of death—for it knew it had met its master.

So 'Blueskin' had got the monster at his mercy at last, and all there was left to do was to kill it.

And he looked forward to that a lot. He crept over, and quickly pinned its long body firm under a few blocks of ballast, and then he took his axe and broke its neck and laughed like a maniac till the rocks rang again.

He smoked a pipe after that and rested and let the night dry his sweat; and presently, already pretty stiff and sore after the battle, he tied up his wounded hand, cleaned himself with sea water, made the boat so ship-shape as he could by moonlight, and then drew in his mooring rope and cast off. A thin breeze was moving by now, and Sol set up his mast and lug sail; then he lighted his pipe again and got moving.

His only sorrow was that Daleham would be to bed and nobody see his great triumph till morning. The boat moved and the wind whispered over his head. Down under his feet lay the mass of the black eel, and now and again Sol bent and touched it to make sure it was still there. Two tacks he took and then came creeping in under a green light that marked the harbour mouth. He downed sail, pulled in and out among the empty trawlers riding at anchorage, and so got to the quay, where a policeman lent him a hand, listened to his wonderful yarn, and helped him to bring the fish ashore.

But the officer didn't set much faith on what Solomon Blight told him, for the fisherman talked about Mother Moggs's curse, and how, but for his own strength and skill and courage, the conger must have slain him ten times over, and how Mother Moggs did ought to be hung for a murderess, and so on.

After that Sol went his way to his house, and drank half a bottle of whisky afore he turned in.

The next morning the eel was the centre of excitement for Daleham. Not the oldest among the people had ever seen anything like it afore, and such was the monster's fame that many travelled a good few miles to see it. Sol's conger got in the papers also, being the heaviest creature of that species ever known in Devon, though Cornish men, as be always jealous of Devonshire men, swore that bigger eels had come out of their waters. Anyway, the creature was very near fifteen feet long and weighed a hundred and forty pounds and over; and the owner made a show of it, and took it round Daleham on a hand-barrow, and netted a good few shillings that way, and then he sold it in open market and got £5 for the carcass.

He kept two pounds of the tail for his own dinner, because he said he'd like to have a bite off the beggar that had took a bite off him, and he made a lot of noise up and down the village and was very pleased with himself. But he held to it most steadfast that Mrs. Mogridge had worked a charm against him, and he swore that if the eel had run a bit bigger, and he hadn't proved himself such a valiant hero, her cuss would have come true and he'd have thrown his line and catched his death sure enough. And he didn't forget to laugh at Johnny Tapper either, and tell the man he was a poor ninny-hammer, not fit to go netting white-bait, let alone deep-sea fish.

But I can't say as 'Blueskin' got much applause, for he was hated at the best of times, and a very hatch-mouthed man; and, anyway, the people thought he'd come well out of it with all that big money for his trouble. His eyes were both black next morning where the conger had smote

him and his hand had a tidy wound upon it; but he was all right, and went to his dinner in a very cheerful frame of mind, and declared himself quite ready to take his trawler to sea as usual on the evening tide.

A woman as did his housework for him cooked the conger, and his little lad, full of excitement at the great adventure, sat down to the table along with him and had a bite of the fish also. And Sol ate and bragged and drank and said he'd have another fine bit of fishing at the Devil's Rocks afore long. He was in a merry mood that morning, and young Billy felt so happy as need be to see his father cheerful and to get a grin from him instead of a smack on the ear, which was what he most often got. So they stuffed, and the child chattered and got merry, as childer will when they're full of victuals. For such food as would make you or me mighty thoughtful, only goes to childer's heads and turns 'em lively as crickets.

But now Billy had something to laugh at, for his father did a comical thing and made the child shout with laughter.

"Funny daddy!" he said.

For just as 'Blueskin' was putting away the last of the eel with his fork and stretching out t'other hand for his mug of beer, he dropped the fork with a rattle and clapped both hands to his throat, and goggled his eyes as if he'd seen a ghost. And Billy laughed and laughed, while his father jumped up and shook his head like a bulldog and made such comical sounds that the kid could hardly contain himself.

Then his father began to get wild, and thrust his fingers down his throttle, and his face seemed to grow and puff out like a toadstool, and turn

redder and redder. He fell back off his chair the next minute, and screeched so loud as a seagull; and then he began to beat the stone floor with his fists, and roll and turn and twist and tie himself in knots, same as the black conger had.

But by that time little William had gived over laughing and grown a thought feared.

"Stop, daddy! Stop, daddy!" he began crying out. Then he found himself frightened, and felt there must be something a bit wrong with his parent. He dursn't go near the kicking man, but he jumped off his chair and screamed for help. And then he ran down the passage and ope'd the door and went out in the street and yelled for all he was worth.

It happened that John Tapper was coming up to see Blight at the moment, and the child ran to him and tried to explain.

"Daddy's rolling over on the floor and his face be gone black, Mister Tapper," he whimpered; so the fisherman, guessing his skipper had got drunker than usual, went in the house to look after him. But he didn't find no 'Blueskin,' only the corpse of the man, for he'd gone out of it afore Johnny got to him; he lay still enough now, and his troubles were ended.

A crowd of neighbours were soon swarming round the place, and they fetched the doctor to him; but he couldn't do nought except explain what had overtook the unfortunate chap.

You see, gulching his food, Sol had let down one of the spine bones of the conger, and this here bone wedged good and hard between the air of life and his breathing parts. So he had to choke to death, because only a skilled hand could have saved him, the doctor said. He'd

been strangled, in fact, and that was all there was to it.

'Tis certain that none cared over much about the tragical finish of Sol; but the people looked a bit doubtful at Mother Moggs afterwards, for Johnny Tapper told all about the famous cuss, and it showed that, do what he might, 'Blueskin' wasn't going to escape from it. He'd thrown his line and catched his death all right, and nobody could deny it. Folk thought more of wonders and mysteries in the years agone than what they do now; and, though few tears were dropped for Solomon Blight, the folk did take mighty good care to keep civil when they had anything to do with Mrs. Mogridge.

But she was innocent enough, of course, poor soul, and had only spoke in a temper after Solomon rolled her over. She took charge of little Billy Blight from that day forward, and no child had a better or kinder foster-mother. And well I remember her; and too well, after more'n half a century, I can call home my poor father's sudden and fearful death, though only up six years old at the time.

Yes, I be William Blight, and very well thought on and very successful and respectable, thank God! A fisherman also by trade, but not one of my three sons have took after the sea. Along of modern education, they choose to bide where the money is, and that's ashore.

XI

THE SNOW-STORM

STANNON FARM lies under Stannon Hill, and the brake-fern and gert boulders come to the very door, you might say. But there's land there too, of a sort—just a few acres of rough meadow saved from the Moor; and even a patch where Matthew French grew roots and a bit of greenstuff; though it calls for a terrible lot of lime and farmyard food to get a turnip or potato out of peat. In fact, 'pon Dartymoor, as they who best know will tell you, if you want to raise crops you've got to bring soil as well as seed—ess fay, and to 'denshire' the earth with fire.

Well, Stannon's the loneliest of all the 'new-take' tenements out Postbridge way. It lies a good mile or more from Hartland, and stretches out its sides under a black, tar-pitched roof, like a hen spreading her wings over her chickens.

The brood to Stannon was a small one in Matt French's time; and, indeed, the tenement wouldn't have held very many. There was no more than Matt himself, and Mary, his wife, and Marjorie, their darter. But a small family has its compensations, and French was pretty snug, with four figures at the bank 'twas rumoured, though when taxed with it he always denied most steadfast.

"Live!" he was used to say. "How do I live? Like a toad under a harrow!"

But 'twas all rubbish. He had lots of money, and everybody knew that Marjorie was good for a hundred pound, if not more, the day she took a husband.

Her father was wilful and she was rash. They loved each other fiercely, with the love that quarrels fiercely. Mrs. French was no more than a buffer between 'em; and she got pinched a bit in the process, as buffers will.

A calm, even-tempered woman—brown-eyed, with a nose like Judy and a patient mouth. And her daughter was brown-eyed too; but she had her father's nose—tip-tilted a thought, though only just enough for charm; full lips and a sturdy habit, and better rounded off at ankle and wrist than most maidens. She took after her mother's mother, as was very well born by all accounts; and she had airs and graces and ideas; and the ideas it was that always kept her in hot water with her father, for they rose high above home and farm life.

I don't hear as she took overmuch to reading till her father catched her with a silly story-book, and dared her ever to bring such a thing into Stannon again. For he was the sort that held the devil wrote all such things—except the *Pilgrim's Progress*; and he didn't like parts of that. But after he'd forbid books Marjorie found there was a bit of spice to 'em, and of course she set to work to read like a good un. And right soon she filled her pretty head with a mazing load of right-down twaddle and foolishness, as the sequel showed.

Matthew catched her red-handed in her eighteenth year with a poetry-book, and he faced her

out and brought the tears to her eyes, and larned what he guessed afore, that 'twas the son of Mr. Jonathan Crymes, to Hartland Farm, who gave the girl this trash. And he put the poetry —*Love's Garland of Verse*, or some such mess —into the kitchen fire afore her face, and she said:

"'Tis all one, faither; I've got half the verses by heart; and if you'd read the book instead of burning it, maybe you wouldn't have done what you have done."

Then he turned on her and made answer.

"'Tis that anointed fool Andy Crymes who gave you the book," he declared.

And she didn't deny it.

"Mr. Andrew Crymes gave me the book; but seeing he's the first scholar in these parts, and can read and write as well as parson, you'm out of reason to call him an anointed fool."

And Matthew's grey eyes flashed and his grey beard bristled, and he stuck out his chin afore him, as he always did when he was fighting life; and he said:

"Fool or no fool, he's not the fashion of man that need trouble me, or seek to ease me of my darter. A nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse."

"Time enough for you to storm when Andrew axes me, I should think," said the woman, cool as a cucumber. And cruel cool it was, seeing that she and young Crymes had long been tokened in secret, and understood each other perfectly, and was only waiting the right moment to come before Mr. French and ax his blessing on the enterprise.

But well Marjorie knew from the first that

the right moment for that bit of work would never come. Andrew Crymes was the very daps of herself in many ways, and, while she held her head high at Stannon and gave herself unconscious airs by the queer accident of her blood harking back to her mother's mother, Andrew Crymes did much the same at Hartland. He was a great reader, and even a rhyme-maker too, and the Lord knows where he drew his blood from; for since the beginning of all things, when John Crymes married Unity Blake, the baker's daughter, and started life at Hartland, such a thing as a Crymes with love for books had never been known in the family. And of course Matt French, he openly flouted any man so knock-kneed as to read rhymes; while as for the poor-spirited wretch as could sink to make 'em, he'd have set such a one to mind the children or do other woman's work, and called him 'man' no more.

Yet such is the gulf that may lie 'twixt father and darter, even while Marjorie was telling the barefaced lie that Andy Crymes was nought to her, she had rhymes of his hung round her neck at that moment in a little bag next her skin! Though that would never have come out for sartain but for the snow-storm.

She was eighteen and Crymes was twenty-one. Her you've glimpsed, with her brown eyes and busy way and saucy nose, and pluck to beard her bristly parent; but the young man was a pleasant object also, though somewhat old-looking for his years, no doubt along of taking a lot of idle thought and reading more nonsense than he could digest. She treated him like a child, I believe, and he did her bidding and enlarged

her mind—or thought to; while she, for payment, put a bit of steel into him, made him show a cheerfuller conceit of himself, tie his necktie neater, wear clean collars, and keep his waistcoat buttoned up, and other little finicking fancies that she had a mind to. He did all these things, and they was quite the gentleman and lady, I'm sure; and it was perfectly right, natural, and proper that they should fall in love each with t'other; for there was none else like 'em in those parts, and they seemed made for each other in every way—built to better each the other's life and bolster each the other's faults. For Andy, with all his womanly, silly little fancies and whims, was quite equal to standing to work; and work he did, whether for pleasure or duty I know not; but he understood cattle very properly, and his father, though he held that the young man was soft-headed where a book was the matter, gave him credit for plenty of sense—in fact, more than he'd got, as parents will.

The storm brewed for six months and then it bust, and there was a proper tantara. First comed the row between Matt and his girl, in which, among other trifles, poor Mrs. French was squeezed flat as a door, and went about gasping and breathless—more like a spectrum than a stout woman; and then followed the flare-up betwixt Jonathan Crymes, Andy's father, and Matthew himself. They'd been good friends and neighbours till then; but when Matt refused to let Marjorie have Andrew, and gave his reasons, with all the fire of his nature and strength of his tongue, Andy's parent took it up and wanted to know why the mischief a Crymes wasn't good enough for a French anyhow, and what all the

fiends in hell was the matter with his terrible clever son that Marjorie must look so much higher. Because never was a race that stuck closer together than the Crymes people; and though Jonathan may have had his private ideas about his boy's book-larning, he wasn't going to take no contemptuous speeches from nobody else on the subject.

So things ran at a deadlock, and the families didn't speak as they passed, though the fathers were quite agreed that there must be no marriage after their last pitched battle of words, for it ended by Matt saying, in his fierce way, how he'd sooner see his darter dead than married to such a zany as Andrew Crymes; and by Jonathan answering that he'd sooner see his son underground also than hitched to any girl with Matthew's blood in her veins.

The young people, by all accounts, waited very patient for their elders to settle their row first, and when that was done, then Marjorie stirred herself.

I suppose 'twas all the books and poetry had turned her head; but she told Andy point-blank that he'd got to run away with her, and be quick about it.

"'Tis very plain what we must do," said she. "We'll get across to Okehampton, and you can marry me at the registry-office; then we'll both go home again and bide our time till the gale have blowed itself out and these valiant old men can see straight once more. Then, when the day comes, and your parent understands me a bit, and mine knows the sort of man you are, we can break it to 'em."

"'Tis just your old man's ignorance and wrong-

headedness," declares Andy. "If he'd only let me have a good long talk with him, I'd show him how 'tis in a twinkling."

"Ban't a time for 'ifs,'" she tells him. "We'll stick to business, my dear."

And they did, and 'twas settled that they'd go off 'pon the same day to Okehampton slap across the Moor.

"You'll ride over on business and be home the next morning," she said; "and I shall go walking alone, and lose myself, and find that the only thing to be done is to get down to Okehampton, and send a telegram to my home that I'm all right, and will be back so soon as possible. But the thing for us to do is to hide it from everybody that we were in Okehampton together."

They talked it all out very clever; and towards the time Andy took the proper steps, and all was ready for the marriage at Okehampton. The Crymes folk had relations there, and 'twas nothing strange that young Crymes should ride over, for he often did so.

Spring came, and half-way through February a spell of hard frost went afore the runaway match and made the Moor iron-hard. And Marjorie smiled, for nought better could have happened. She was off before midday—pretending to go for a tramp over to see the wife of the shepherd at Teign Head Cot afar off; but she meant to miss her way, of course, and go elsewhere; and Andy with his hoss was to be at the Grey Wethers to meet her soon after noon. Then she was to get up behind him, and he'd gallop her away to the hill over Okehampton. After that she'd walk down, and ax a friend there to give her a bed for the night, and send off a telegram to Stannon

saying how she was safe. As for Andrew, he'd go to his relations according to arrangements. None would see 'em together but the registrar next morning. Then, the deed done, Marjorie would be off home, and Andrew go about his business.

It worked out very suent in words, as such things do; and it promised to happen as sure as two determined wills could bring it about. But 'tis curious what a wonnerful big part in our affairs weather and winter take. A pinch of frost may freeze the heart out of a man, or the life out of a plot; or it may put the finishing touch to a piece of business and crown all with success. In the same way, a bit of ice that's a bar for the ship may be a very handy bridge for the polar bear.

Anyway, when Marjorie started afore the coming of that great noon—for to see Shepherd Newte's wife at Teign Head, as she pretended —the earth was kind and hard as flint, and splendid for quick travelling; but the sky promised trouble before she'd got out of Stannon door.

From Postbridge to Okehampton, by the road that Andrew must ride, was a good ten mile or more, and Marjorie had to travel near three mile on foot afore she picked up with him at the Grey Wethers.

She set off in her warmest clothes, with a thick, heavy tippet over her shoulders, to brave the north wind. 'Twas a stout garment, made of rabbit skins; and it becomed an heirloom in her family afterward.

'Twas offering to snow when she started, and her father cautioned her to keep her eyes on the

weather; but the woman laughed at him. Her blood was up; she was strong and hearty and knew not fear. She only reckoned the snow would make her story sound the truer. Experience she had, however, and she knowed well enough if snow comes on a fierce wind, there's danger abroad; and when the few first wild flakes gave over and the snow dust began to follow, sweeping like black mist along the earth, that meant the beginning of a blizzard—another name for death if you'm taken in it far from succour.

But afore the fine snow began to hit her—not out of heaven, but at earth level, driven along the ground—she had made two mile. And she felt warm and glowing to the finger-tips. The Moor was good for going, and the sky didn't appear over dark, except northerly, in the eye of the wind; so she held on over White Ridge, sank down t'other side, and soon saw the Grey Wethers standing for all the world like a little flock of sheep on the edge of the hill under Siddaford Tor. There the lonely stones do bide; and who set 'em up in shape of two gert circles 'pon the wilderness, and why they was put there, no man can tell. Already the ground was beginning to whiten, and the squat grey stones showed white against the snow-clouds behind 'em.

Marjorie, with her head well down, and trying to still the growing fears that her knowledge cried to her heart, kept on, and her speed was such that she reached the Grey Wethers afore the mounted man. 'Twas no place to linger in at that hour, and after ten minutes there, with her back against a stone, and the wind blowing through granite and flesh together, she rose up, a bit frightened, to feel herself going stiff already.

'Twas coming in earnest now, and all the king's hosses and all the king's men could no more have fetched across Dartymoor to Okehampton that evening than they could have flown across. And Marjorie knowed it. Thicker and thicker it began to drive, and every stone of the Grey Wethers had a two-inch coat of snow on the windward side afore she left 'em. Then terrible fear began to over-get her—not for herself, but the man. Long ago she ought to have been running for dear life afore the wind homeward; and even then 'twas likely to be a question if her nature would be strong enough to fight the gathering cold back to Stannon; but to Stannon she had no thought of going. She took her way down the valley of East Dart, for 'twas by that channel among the hills her lover should have come.

And as she ran she found time, even in her bewildered fear, to mark what a small, pitiful little plan theirs did look afore this mighty rage of weather.

"We'm greater than the weather, all the same," she panted to herself, as she afterwards confessed, "and a thousand blizzards won't keep us apart if we come alive out of this one."

It looked, however, as if one storm was going to do the trick pretty complete. She ran on and on, shouting so loud as she could; but her little noise against the wind was like a bird chirruping in thunder, and 'twas her eyes, not her voice, that found Andrew Crymes at last. He saw her at the same time and beckoned, and she fought across to him. By good chance Dart was small water just then, and she hopped over quick to where he had got. And for a time he was so

terrible thankful to see her alive, that he couldn't speak of his own mishap.

Then he told her that, going fast by the brink of the river, his horse had put his foot in a hole and let him down. He reckoned he'd broke his ankle.

Andy knew himself for doomed if none found him. He'd hoped to race the blizzard, and get down over into the Okehampton country while yet the Moor was to be crossed. But then came the accident, and when he comed to his senses again—for he lost 'em after his smash—the storm was on him, and his horse had limped, the Lord only could tell where. He knew there must come a drift of snow in the hollow where he lay afore dark, for the whiteness was piling up under his eyes, and the cold had got into him, so that his limbs, broken ankle and all, were like bits of dead wood.

And so Marjorie found him and heard his frosty news. And she marked that, after the joy of seeing her safe and sound, the man seemed to care for nought more in life. In fact, he'd took his farewell of it, and was waiting for the snow sleep, and was wondering if he'd wake in another world to find the maiden there afore him, when he spied her fifty yards away; and she see'd him at the same moment.

The chance of life hung on a gossamer for the man, and looked little better for her; but Marjorie made a fight for it and didn't waste time. She got him on his sound leg and made him trust to her shoulder, and so he worked along two hundred yards to a sheltered hole nigh the river. Granite clitters tumbled down over the hill there, and a stone had caught and made a natural penthouse—

a place that had heard their love talk many a day. 'Twas more than big enough for Andy, so in he crawled; and then she broke up a bit of furze and stuffed it in the crannies to keep the screeching wind out. More furze and fern she fetched, and filled the mouth of the hole with it; then she took the bearings of the place and was able by good chance to mark it, because a broken water leat ran just above the spot.

"Keep up your heart, Andy," she said, "and if none don't save you, you'll know I'm gone too, and 'twill make going easier for you. And keep awake, for my sake, for sleep be death."

With that she took her rabbit-skin tippet and thrust it on to him, and afore he could cry out against it she was gone. So he said to himself, "There's only one thing for me to do for such a woman as that; and that is to live for her. And by God I will!"

So he took the fur and packed it round him warm from her. And then he set himself to wait; and no man ever had terribler company of his thoughts, so long as he could keep 'em. 'Twas often a matter of talk afterward whether his fight for life or hers was the worst; and most people agreed that they'd sooner have been in Marjorie's shoes than the man's on that night. For she had to use her body and pit her stout heart and strength against that blinding snow and the cold that came with it; but he had to lie like a log and feel the cold conquer inch by inch, and fight the awful longing to escape it by the way of sleep. For two hours he could see his watch, but after that darkness prevented it.

And she set off for Hartland Farm, and meant to follow the river at any cost, and so keep her

way steady; but the blizzard was getting fairly to work now, and the snow-wreaths soon whirled all sense out of her head and set her chilled brain spinning. She flinched unconsciously from the full blast of the cold on her back, and so got far off from the stream, half-way down between Stannon and Hartland. By keeping afore the storm, and letting the snow beat on her left side, she knew she was making the right way; but more she did not know, and her senses were nearly all dead and her soul dazed when she struck by miracle into the great ruined sheepfold that lies on the south of Stannon Hill. 'Twas built by that John Crymes who first went to Hartland. Him and a Scots gentleman set it there, and the dwelling-house was burned down long ago and a little child burned with it. But now it saved a life for the life that was lost afore, and Marjorie French got a wall between her and the storm and collected her thoughts, and then made the last fierce fight of it to her home.

None will know how she got over the shoulder of Stannon, a foot deep in snow by that time, or how she kept out of the drifts or escaped breaking her neck in the clitters; but home she reached alive, and they see'd her from the windows and rushed out and carried her in.

They got her to the fire and stripped off her clothes and plunged her in hot water and poured hot spirits into her, and she began to catch heat after an hour. But long afore that—in fact, with her last breath, you might say—she'd told her father how it was with Andy Crymes, and where he lay, and begged him, for the love of God and man, to fight for him. Then she went queer for a spell, and 'twas while she was unconscious that

her mother found the little bag of Andy's silly rhymes strung round her neck against her bosom.

So Matthew French had no choice but to turn out, and he took his man with him; but not a yard would he go afore he heard from his wife that Marjorie had come round again, because she swounded thrice when the warmth got to her; and the fear was that she was frost-bitten, and would lose her fingers, if not her toes.

Matt and the hind struggled across to Hartland with the bad news; and very soon Farmer Crymes and his two other sons, with a few dogs and a bottle of liquor, fought off up the valley. But Matthew didn't go, for he was far too troubled for his own girl, and reckoned he'd have had enough hisself by the time he got home. She'd given him clear direction, however; and when the Hartland folk started on their rescue they knew what lay before 'em, and where Andy was to be found, if they could get there.

French and his man reached home easier than he'd come, for 'twas after six in the evening by now, and growing dark. The wind had also dropped, and the worst cold was past for the moment. 'Twas like as if Providence held its hand for an hour or two; but anyway, what had gone afore was nought to what come after; for by midnight the wind was up again hurricane high, and none—not the oldest—could call home a more terrible stroke of weather.

For four days Stannon was cut off from the rest of the world, and, in truth, 'twas above two weeks before any sane man would have sought to get afield; but that happened that sent Matthew French across to Hartland on the fourth day, because if he hadn't a-gone his darter would

have—or else died trying to. She was stark mad by the fourth day, along of not knowing the best or worst, and she said that if she didn't get news she'd do away with herself. A narrow shave the girl had had of losing her life a'ready, and for four-and-twenty hours after she got home she was dazed and numb and three-parts dead. Then her blood began to trickle steady again, and she got stronger and clearer in the mind, and took food at her mother's entreaty. The cold had bitten into one foot, and she went lame for life after, but her vitals was all right. Then each day that kept her from the truth about Andrew made her more terrible wild, and at last she said, no matter for her cruel wounded foot and all, but she'd get across to Hartland somehow if nobody wouldn't go for her.

So the fourth day Matt brings out his pony and straps a blanket over it, and starts off for Hartland. The wind was down a bit, and the sky bright as June; but the danger lay below. However, he knowed where the road ought to lie pretty near, and threaded the Moor and the fens, and got to Hartland in an hour.

And 'twas Jonathan Crymes himself who told t'other of the adventure. But first he must needs hear how Marjorie had fared, and if she was alive. Then he sent his old woman elsewhere with that news, and told his tale.

"Me and Jim and William went off, as you know, and got along so swift as we could in the teeth of the storm. By the Lord's will it slacked for an hour or more, and in that time we'd fetched up to the place, and was just able to mark where the water-way runs above. Then we hunted and shouted and poked round; but 'twould have been

in vain without the dogs. 'Twas them that found the hole where Andy was got, and they was hollering and scrambling into it by the time we reached 'em. And there he was, snug as you please, but deathly cold, and sound asleep, it seemed. Into the snow sleep he'd got, and doctor, who was up here yesterday, and nearly broke his neck in coming, says that your girl's rabbit-skins saved the man. Us shook him and bawled into his ear, and roused him into something you might call life. Then we poured liquor into him, and carried him down to the hoss, and got him up. Dark as hell it was by that time; and how the four of us came back without going in the river or getting froze alive, I can't say. The full storm was up half an hour before we got in; but mother had lights in the winders, and let off my gun every ten minutes to help us home. And at last we catched sight of the lights, when we didn't know from Adam where we was to, and headed for Hartland, and tumbled in the house; and if going into heaven will be a better thing, may I get there to taste it when my time comes!

"Andy was like a log by then, though he'd got three parts of a bottle of gin in him; but we fetched him down off the hoss and carried him in, and his mother set about him.

"Then I put home the hoss and gave 'un a big hot bran mash, which he'd earned; and then us and the dogs and all got indoors, and made ourselves so warm as we was able.

"We thought that Andy was gone a dozen times afore day, and I'll swear his heart kept stopping time and again, for I had my hand upon it half the night. My youngest boy was awful

bad too, but he mended yesterday; and Andy, I reckon, be going to be saved now. This here news about your girl will do the trick, I dare say. Not that he'll ever be the same man no more. I don't hope it, and I don't expect it. And now you'd best have a dram and get back home, Matthew, afore the sun's over the hill and the cold's down on us again."

But French stopped half an hour longer, and there's no doubt that from that hour the two men made up their difference. They'd each seen a child in the shadow of death, and they'd each seen what that rash pair was to one another. For Andy had raved of nought but Marjorie, and how she'd throwed away her precious life for him; and Marjorie had kept on, morning, noon, and night, about Andy, till her father felt 'twas idle to say much more against the man.

So French went home with his pocket full of news, and his darter growed sane once more, and shed some wholesome tears, and thanked her Maker, and slept in peace for the first time since her adventure.

When the chap was out of danger, and making good recovery, and when the doctor had looked after the girl also, and seen to her sick foot, each of 'em confessed to their own folk about the thing they'd meant to do. And 'twas settled then that they'd better have their way, after the manner of all such obstinate and headstrong young zanies.

Not till six weeks later, when Marjorie could limp and Andy could crawl, did they meet alone, at a half-way place by the old sheepfold.

Neither knowed how to begin, so they confessed after. Their thoughts at the sight of each other

choked 'em, and they could only look, and look, and hold tight. But at last Andy spoke.

"They've found the bones of my poor hoss up under Grey Wethers," was the first thing he said.

"Better his than ours," answered Marjorie. And then their tongues got to work, I warrant you.

XII

THE VAMP-DISH

WE WAS TELLING about signs and wonders, and what our grandfathers believed; and some said the world was a better place when the folk had more faith; but old Tom Bewes, the vicarage gardener, he swore that the less you took on trust, the less often you'd be a loser. In fact, he was a very non-believing sort of man, and if the vicar had heard some of his opinions, as he spoke in the public bar of the Seven Stars that night, Tom wouldn't have been vicarage gardener no more.

And the evening us heard this tale, Tom Bewes and Jerry Stockman, the sexton, had one of their arguments, because Jerry named a very famous tradition about our font at church, that never one baptized in it was ever hanged; but Tom, he flouted it, and vowed that no man with any credit for sense could believe such a tale.

"If I don't know, who should?" asked Jerry; and to show the truth of what he spoke, he spun us a yarn a hundred year old if not more, and none had the facts so well as him, because it happened in his own mother's family. And this was the yarn:

There was a time when Parson Steel reigned at Lower Town, which be the name of our village, and he was one of the old sort of parsons, which have died out of the land nowadays. He'd fought in the wars against France, and when they were over his father couldn't give him nothing but a church living. But 'twas all one to Dick Steel, so long as he might live an open-air life, and have plenty of hunting and shooting and fishing, and other diversions. So he took holy orders and came to Lower Town and followed his bent, which was to let everybody go their own way, so long as they let him do the like. But if anybody hinted he weren't the man for the job, he very quick showed his teeth; and soon the people got to know their hopes of salvation weren't going to be much bettered by Parson Steel.

There's a hundred stories about his goings on. 'Tis said he stopped the Exeter coach once, and made a hundred guineas by it. In fact, every outrageous deed as happened in these parts in them days was believed to start with him. And, as like will to like, he found a very willing and able partner in his wild ways; and the man was Teddy Snow, Farmer Snow's son, at Green Hayes farm, in this parish.

As for Farmer Snow himself, he strove to turn his son into Christian ways; but when the holy head of the parish was such a man as Parson Steel, few well-meaning fathers could hope for much. There were complications, because you couldn't quarrel with Dicky Steel. Everybody loved him against their better natures; and though the people shook their heads at his terrible reckless conduct, not a man in the parish but admired him in an uneasy sort of fashion. So

did the women; because, though a godless blade pretty near all round, with little to be said for him, where women was concerned he'd never been known to do anything unworthy of his cloth, or what didn't become a gentleman born.

But he fell in love at last, much to the surprise of the folk, though it weren't strange in reality, for the rough-and-tumble maid that took his eye might well have been just the one to do so.

Jenifer Snow was Teddy's sister, and there's no doubt she'd lent him a hand in some queer feats now and again, and when Teddy fought Pedlar Triggs, a Plymouth middle-weight, for twenty-five pounds a-side and beat him, it was Jenifer, much to the scandal of 'the fancy,' that seconded her brother in the ring. Parson Steel found the money for Ted, and at the ring-side he met Jenifer for the first time, I believe. She was a big girl, within an inch so tall as her brother—a fair, flaxen thing, and handsome, and hard as nails, and up for anything a woman could do in the sporting line, or what they couldn't, for that matter.

A good few was after her, but she hadn't any use for the men, and when she wasn't in mischief with Teddy she bided at home and did woman's work and minded the dairy, and was so good a daughter as her parents could want. All the same, Jane Snow, her mother, felt very wishful to see the girl married and settled; and when presently parson began to find reasons for visiting Green Hayes, and was amazing smooth-spoken for him, and very civil indeed to Mrs. Snow, and very attentive to the good advice of farmer, then Jenifer's mother began to have her suspicions.

Her husband preached to the vicar a lot better than ever the vicar preached to the people; for the Reverend Dicky, when he got in the pulpit, never was known to bide there five minutes at a stretch. His custom was to give out a good text, and then tell the folk 'twas all there in holy words, and didn't want no turning and twisting from him.

"I can't say nothing better than the Book, my friends," Dicky would tell 'em, with his hawk's eyes rolling over the few as ever went to hear him. "So you just remember the plain Scripture words, and when you find yourselves in two minds, say 'em over and the Light will come. 'Twould only fog that Light if I was to begin messing about with it and chattering to you." Then he'd speak the text again: "Love one another," or "Do as you'd be done by," or what not, and leave it at that to soak in. I dare say there's worse ways of preaching.

Farmer Snow gave him a lot of good advice, and there's no doubt, for his own ends, parson was very patient, and promised to reform here and there and steady down. He also vowed most solemnly that he wouldn't egg on Teddy Snow to wickedness, though, Lord, He knows, the youngster didn't want much egging on; and while Steel, to win Jenifer, went a bit lighter for a time, and did a bit of parson's work in the parish, and raised hopes that he'd sowed his wild oats and was settling down, Teddy, on the contrary, went from bad to worse.

He would do evil simply for the sake of doing it. He'd been spoiled a bit by his mother, perhaps, and she doted on him still. And she always repeated the famous fact that nobody baptized

in our vamp-dish [1] could ever be hung. That had been proved, so 'twas said, and in them wild and ignorant days many wives of bad fathers would bring their childer a score of miles to Lower Town, so as their little necks should be safe against the rope come they grew up. Mrs. Snow most steadfastly believed this great fact, so when farmer shook his head, after some hateful piece of work from Teddy, and said the boy would die in his boots by the hand of Jack Ketch as sure as fate, Jane Snow told him that, whatever fell out, that couldn't be.

'Twas like that when two things happened—one to the Reverend Dicky and t'other to Ted. Parson found himself properly in love with Jenifer, and, flinging aside any thought of the difference in their positions and so on, set to work with all his might and main to win her; and Master Teddy's pitcher went once too often to the well and got cracked. He was catched by three stout men poaching in Dart Vale, where the lord of the manor lived. They'd winded his plans through an informer, and marked him down one November night.

Now stealing game was very near a hanging job in them days, which Teddy knew. He put up a great fight and broke a man's arm; then he got his own head broke, and, but for God's mercy and his thick skull, that would have been an end of him. But he came round three hours after, to find himself in clink, and the Justices, who reckoned that Lower Town, under Parson Steel, was the washpot of the Devil, gived Teddy a year in gaol. So he disappeared for a bit, and a good few breathed the easier.

[1] *Vamp-dish*—font.

And meantime his reverence offered his hand and heart to Jenifer and courted her in a way straight and proper. Her mother, woman-like, was terrible proud, and so was her father, for that matter. Everybody knew all about it, for the clergyman made no secret of his love for her, and his own parents came to Lower Town for a month the following summer and brought a very fine rich maiden with 'em and tried to tempt him away from the woman he loved. But Dicky saw through that, and told Snow and Jenifer, and his own parents too, that 'twas no good trailing red herrings across the scent when he was running.

"There's only one woman on God's earth for me," he said to Jenifer, "and that pasty-faced, town-bred dowdy, with her mincing speech and airs and graces, be the moon to your sun."

But though he used all his wits, Dicky couldn't get 'Yes' out of her. She liked him very well, and liked his ways, and there weren't a man she liked better; but something kept her off. She loved freedom and her own maiden life; and she was a lot down-daunted because her brother was locked up, and didn't seem to have no heart for courting. She had a bit of wickedness in her sleeve, too; because she'd found out the man who gave her brother's secrets away and was responsible for his downfall. The chap was called Nicholas Withycombe, a farmer t'other side of the Vale, and he bragged one night at Ashburton that it was him had laid Teddy by the heels. A friend told Jenifer, and she kept it warm for Withycombe against her brother came home.

But the Reverend Steel was the sort that didn't know when he was beat, so he hung on; and

swore that if Jenifer didn't take him she should have no other.

Then Teddy came out afore Christmas, and, though his parents welcomed him and hoped the treadmill had broke his hard heart, they soon found out it had not. He was pretty quiet for a bit and they began to think he'd mended, but the crash came at the New Year, and it looked as if even Mrs. Snow's trust in our church-font weren't going to save the situation.

When Teddy Snow heard tell about Nicholas Withycombe he made his plans, and one fine evening waited for him down by New Bridge on the river, when he knew as he'd be coming back from market. Teddy stopped him and told the man to take off his coat and fight there and then, or else take the leathering he was prepared to give. Nicholas could fight a bit, though he was noted for the white feather, and he drew two stone heavier than Teddy and stood three inches taller, so that none could say that Teddy offered anything unfair.

His sister and a couple of chaps was along with Snow, and three farmers happened to be going homeward with Withycombe. Nicholas didn't want to fight; but he had no choice, and they went down by an open place nigh the river and set to, with the reds in the sky and evening closing in on 'em.

It weren't a long fight, and Snow didn't mean as it should be. All the hatred and rage he felt to the informer got into his muscles, and he went for Nicholas like a tiger. He was quicker, too, and got going before the bigger man could set himself. 'Twas a short, smashing job—a right and left fair on the face, then another right that

just missed Withycombe's chin, and then one to the mark; and when Nicholas clenched to get out of the storm Tom wrestled like a bear and threw him proper heavy and fell on him. Which was very good for a start; but unfortunately the job ended there, for where they'd chose to fight, on the green side, was a boulder half an inch out of the soil that they didn't know about; and Withycombe went down, with his thirteen-stone weight behind him, on the back of his neck 'pon hard granite.

He was senseless and dead to the world from that moment; and presently, when a cart came along, they got him in and drove him home. He lived a few days, but never come to himself no more; and Parson Steel went over to Green Hayes that same night to beg Ted, for the love of the Lord, to be gone, and get down to the sea and out of the country in the first ship as would take him.

But Dicky was too late. They'd heard all about it to Ashburton, and Ted, while he sat listening to Steel, found the constables round the house. He bolted, but they took him in the stable getting on a horse, and when Nicholas Withycombe went out of life there was a proper uproar as to whether it would be manslaughter or murder. It went very much against Teddy that he'd given out afore all men he was going to break Withycombe's neck; which was pretty much what he had done; and so the dead man's family was terrible keen on getting the gallows for him.

He came up at the Assizes to Exeter; and by ill-luck a hanging judge had the job, for such men was common on the bench in them days.

He summed up against Snow, and Teddy's witnesses hadn't shone neither, and the jury didn't see much beyond the fact that a respectable member of the community and the father of five had been done to death by a notorious evil liver, who was much better hanged and under the daisies than on 'em. So, almost before he fully understood his fix, Master Teddy found himself brought in guilty of murder, and saw the black cap go on, and listened to a bit of ugly news. He was to be took back to the place from where he came, which was Exeter gaol, and there hanged by the neck until he was dead; and the judge hoped the Lord would have mercy on his soul, but didn't say it as if he meant it.

It was wrong in the opinion of a good many interested parties, though few thought twice about the matter, for lives didn't count so precious in them days as they do now, and it was only a short time since men had been hanged for sheep-stealing and stopping a coach. Besides, none felt in any doubt about the sort Teddy was, and even the most friendly gave it as their opinion that it was but a question of time in any case, and if young Snow didn't swing for this job he'd be sure as sunshine to come to it sooner or later.

In fact, he was a doomed man from that hour, and only one creature on God's earth said he wasn't; and that was his mother. Jane Snow, such is the unreasoning way of the female mind, stuck to it most steadfast that her son wouldn't die the shameful death, and she was saying the same, calm and tearless, in the parlour of Green Hayes on a night one week afore the hanging date to her husband and daughter. And the woman's reason was the old one.

"No child baptized in our vamp-dish was ever hanged yet," she said. "It can't be. 'Tis against Almighty God's will and plan, and there's an end of it."

His father had been to take his farewell of Teddy, and all was going so smooth and swift to the last, and not a hand lifted to save him; for it was known that a petition would be all in vain, even if there was a dozen people to sign it; and yet his old mother kept up her head and looked the people in the face according to her custom.

That night her husband broke down and lost his senses for a bit and said he'd put a bullet through his own brain when Teddy was gone; so Mrs. Snow feared for the raving man and sent Jenifer for doctor.

She went, and doctor said he'd be round with a sleeping potion presently; and Jenifer didn't go home, but called at the vicarage and asked to see his reverence. This job had hit Parson Steel very hard indeed, and 'tis certain he'd done pretty much all anybody could do to draw public attention to a failure of justice; but there again the luck was against the doomed man, because Dicky didn't come into the picture with very clean hands as a minister of God above suspicion. Folk said it was natural one rascal should stand up for another, and in fact the reverend gentleman carried no weight except with a few fox-hunters and rough customers as couldn't shake the wheels of justice, and didn't want to be in the public eye themselves. Then came Jenifer and found Dicky looking ten years older and tramping his dining-room, with knit brows and savage eyes, like a caged tiger.

She didn't waste no words, for she knew what was in his mind.

"I be come to say this, Dicky," she said. "If you'll save Teddy's neck, I'll marry you."

But so deep was he in thought that, strange to say, though he heard her, he didn't seem to take in the speech.

He gave a sort of snort, and his black eyes looked through her at her brother, long ways off in the condemned cell at Exeter.

But Jenifer didn't understand his silence.

"Maybe times is changed with you," she said, "and you wouldn't have no use for the sister of a hanged man."

Then he came to himself and took her in his arms and kissed her fiercely.

"I'd have use for the sister of Judas Iscariot, if she was like you," he said. "And I'm doing my best, though the cursed people won't listen to me. There's a dog's chance yet, I believe. I find the Governor of the gaol is an old soldier that I fought under in France. He's left the service and got Exeter Prison as a reward for his work. He was a very good friend to me and liked my fighting. I've got ideas going round in my head, Jenifer. Would you care to see Teddy again?"

"Yes, I would, then."

"That much the Governor might grant. He doesn't know anything about me since the wars, and he was a very just man, though a terrible hard one. Something might come of it, though I can't say what."

They talked far into the night, but didn't get no forwarder, because it remained to be seen what sort of view the Governor would take. And such was his feelings for Teddy, the parson hadn't

no time nor inclination to say much to Jenifer about her fine offer. Nor did he do any love-making while he saw her home. And she liked him the better for it.

The next day he rode to Exeter, and that night he dined along with the Governor of the gaol; and his first ray of hope was soon out, for though old Major Goodbody held that Ted Snow hadn't fairly earned hanging, it was no business of his, and his duty was to see the young man drop, and his duty he'd do, as he had done it all his life. He was rather surprised to see Dicky Steel in the cloth, but, as a very religious man himself, he paid all reverence to it, and, not knowing the reverend gentleman's record at Lower Town and round about, showed him every respect. And Parson Steel did his part, till you'd have thought he was cut out for a bishop.

"'Tis a fearful thing to lose one of my little flock like this," he said, "especially when I know it oughtn't to be."

Then he gave a picture of Teddy that was by no means such as was told at the trial, and the old Governor believed him and felt sorry that such a slur should fall upon the reverend gentleman's parish. They talked, and Dicky soon saw he'd be wasting his wind and losing his credit to hint at a bit of a plot; so he didn't, and only asked, just afore he was leaving, if Jenifer might see her brother for the last time. He said that the young woman was devoted to the boy, and that for the sake of humanity she did ought to be allowed to take her leave of him and give him a message from his heart-broken mother. And the Governor granted that, and said he'd make the order himself.

Then Dicky said that, of course, she could see him alone and say her last farewell without alien eyes upon their parting. The girl, he said, couldn't be asked to stand strangers round her at such a moment. But the Governor wouldn't suffer this, and withstood all arguments, though Dicky pressed for it. But he made a last suggestion, and the Major felt that might meet the case.

"If I go along with the poor child," said Dicky, "then the law wouldn't be flouted, seeing I've got nothing to do but my duty, as the shepherd. And being a man whose calling puts him above suspicion, I can support them in their trial and say the word in season, which I'm wishful to do for poor young Snow."

It seemed a reasonable thing that their pastor should support the poor wretches in their eternal farewell, and Dicky took such a wonderful high line and called on Heaven so loud that the old soldier felt that he was talking with the other tongues than human. In fact, he agreed to let it be so.

"For both their sakes I'll cut it short, and the turnkeys needn't give us above three minutes," said his reverence. "It will help poor Ted to go bravely, and will be a comfort to the girl and her mother. He's got a poor old father, too; and you can guess what my task is with them. It has made an old man of me, Major."

So it was left at that, and the soldier felt properly kindly to all concerned, for he was a parent himself.

Three days later parson undertook to be there at such an hour as permission might be granted; and sure enough, at the appointed time, Jenifer,

so white as a ghost, and parson, drawn and haggard in his black, came on foot to the prison, where they were expected.

The Governor saw 'em for five minutes, and offered the poor young woman a glass of wine, but she only shook her head, and her companion explained that she was wishful for the fearful ordeal to be ended if possible afore she fainted. "And so am I," added the reverend gentleman. "And you, who have got a heart, Major, will guess what this means to me."

They went at last, the girl shaking, and parson holding of her up; and presently they came to the condemned cell, and, according to orders, his reverence and his parishioners was left alone for a matter of five minutes, rules and regulations being different then from what they are now. But 'twas far too much for Jenifer, and afore they'd faced Teddy above three minutes, parson knocked at the door and the turnkey opened it.

"Let us get out of this for God's sake!" begged Dicky. "'Tis beyond the poor girl's strength."

He was holding Jenifer up. The unhappy creature shook with sobs, and her bright hair had fallen from under the little red riding-hood she wore. She tottered and drooped like a withered flower, and 'twas all the clergyman could do to keep her on her feet. And his face was a proper hell of agony, too, with the sweat running down it.

The head turnkey, as looked after Teddy, chanced to be a fairly good-hearted man, and he liked young Snow, and felt terrible sorry for all concerned.

"Leave the poor fellow alone for five minutes, to recover his manhood, officer," said parson.

"He's shook to the depths. 'Tis an awful wrench, because his sister was the dearest thing in the world to him."

And the gaoler thought that to be a word very becoming in a minister of the church; and he said, after, that he bided a good ten minutes, for human kindness and out of consideration for the murderer's tears.

Then he went in, to find Teddy lying face downwards on his bed, and so left him a bit longer, till the hour of his evening meal.

And when they brought it, they discovered what I dare say you ban't much astonished to hear. Jenifer Snow, in her brother's breeches and coat, they found; and they knew that their prisoner and the parson had got the best part of two hours' start of 'em.

There was a pretty bobbery as you may guess, and the Governor of the prison went very near mad when he heard tell the news. Because he reckoned, among a lot of other things, that it meant he'd lose his job for one.

They soon had mounted men out, but on a dark winter's night and no clues to the escaped man and his friend, they could do little; because it was before the days of the telegraph and railways, so the law had a harder job to catch a malefactor than what it has now. A good few vagrant men were picked up on the roads that night; but Teddy Snow was not one of 'em, and all they could learn was that his reverence and a maiden had rode up to an inn near the gaol and put up their horses for half an hour, then come back and rode off. An ostler knew that much, and he knew the clergyman carried a parcel, and no living man in Exeter knew more.

Then the news came to Lower Town next morn with mounted police from Exeter, and all they heard there was that the Reverend Steel hadn't been seen since the day before, when he'd rode off with Jenifer Snow on one of his hosses and himself on the other. And it weren't for a week after that, so slow did news travel in them days, that the horses turned up at Plymouth. And another clue was reported from Haldon Heights, for there a labouring man found Jenifer Snow's gown and her hat and a few curls, made of lint-white tow, the colour of her hair, which her brother had worn doubtless when he went past the turnkeys, with his face in a handkercher and his knees sagging under him and his arm in parson's. Over Haldon they'd gone in the dead of night; and there, no doubt, the clothes what his reverence had brought was donned by Teddy. 'Twas calculated they jumped thirteen turnpike gates that night, afore they reached to Plymouth, wi' a brace of horses that must have gone seventy miles since the morn. Dicky always did have blood horses; but even so 'twas a great feat. It was also discovered they'd knocked up an inn on the edge of Dartmoor, and baited their beasts, and made a big meal and paid fancy money for it, at two in the morning. Then they must have gone straight to Plymouth; and the steeds turned up in the hands of a dealer who knew their value and bought 'em cheap. The Reverend Steel and Teddy had been seen at the Barbican and elsewhere; and then they vanished from the eyes of the nation, and everybody knowed very well without any telling that they'd slipped England and got off—most like in some small French trader. No doubt they left their country

for their country's good, and they never come back no more—not to stop; and it was said that, though she knew she wouldn't set eyes on the man again, his mother took it in her usual even way and was content to think the font had done its holy duty and saved his life.

As for Jenifer, there's an instinct in this country that will even forgive unlawful deeds, if they have a flavour of good sport and a spice of fun to 'em. In fact, many said she did ought to be richly rewarded for saving her brother's neck; and a few bloods sent round the hat for her after, and fetched her in a hundred guineas. The folk all thought she'd get a year in clink at least; but she didn't. They cross-examined her very close, but couldn't get nothing out of her; and then they let her go and watched her, like a kestrel watches a lizard; for they guessed she'd give it away presently.

And a Bow Street runner came down to Lower Town for a bit and put up at the Seven Stars and pretended he was a gentleman; but everybody saw through him clear enough and he gleaned nought, for Jenifer was quite a reformed character then, and no girl behaved better or looked sharper after her father's kine and his butter and cheese.

Not for a year did anything happen and the case was very near forgot, and a new clergyman came to the church. Then, like a night hawk, Jenifer was away, and her parents knew nothing; but they guessed a lot. In their opinion there was somebody had come for her by night, and they little doubted that the man was her sweetheart.

And they went farther and reckoned that, by

the mysterious will of God, Dicky had slipped over from France to Plymouth on the quiet and taken Jenifer back the same way. Nothing was done to the old people about it; though, after that, 'twas noticed that Farmer Snow had business to Plymouth sometimes; and our sexton's great-grandmother always ended the tale the same way, by saying that her sister, Jane Snow, told her a year later she had got a grandson.

"And I wish to God," she used to say, "that the boy could be baptized in our font, for the son of Dicky Steel and my Jenifer may come to need it."

XIII

FOR VALOUR

SOMETIMES OF A NIGHT, when us old men met at the Plume of Feathers, the conversation took a very serious turn, if Gregory Snow wasn't there; but Greg never would have it serious, and when the talk touched a subject calling for intellects in a man, and he was by, he'd fret and fume and chatter till he'd got us all laughing again, or telling about the things we knew, or what was going on round about among the neighbours. Human nature and such-like subjects was no use to Gregory Snow; but many of us, with the world behind us, and three or four score in sight, naturally turned to sober things sometimes.

Moses Butt, our silent member, began that night, and for him to say twenty words running was a wonder in itself; but something had happened in the course of the day to make him use his wits, and he spoke a pretty deep idea, that showed he wasn't one of them men who don't talk because they've gotten nought to say.

"'Tis a terrible queer trick of nature as makes a man always hanker for the gift denied him," declared Butt. "If us have money, us wants health; if us have our health, we cry out for

money; the farmer would like for to be a sojer; the sailor longs for the plough-tail; the parlour-maid sighs to be at the cooking; the cook wants to go in a bar."

We was a bit surprised to hear Moses say such things, and he see'd our astonishment, and explained the great idea had been brought home to him by his brother's son.

"My brother, James, wants his boy to follow his footsteps in the shop-of-all-sorts he keeps to Ashburton," explained Butt. "And what more natural that the son should step in his father's shoes and carry on the business? But young James be all for open air, and cries out to be a gamekeeper—a dog's life, as we all know, and sows the seeds of everlasting rheumatics afore a man's turned fifty. And he says, if he ban't a keeper, he'll go on the sea; but the tameness of a shop-of-all-sorts do sadden him cruel even to think upon; while the smell of it turns his stomach that furious he can't let down his victuals."

"'Tis a very mysterious smell," declared Innkeeper Rowland, from behind his bar. "In fact, you might say there's nothing else on earth like the air in a shop-of-all-sorts. 'Tis a manifold mixture, and the nose trieth in vain to sort it; but put treacle and leather, and cheese and sweet-stuff, and cotton goods and underclothing, and fruit and vegetables close together, and there rises up a sort of a tang that can't be found anywhere else."

But Samuel Bonus—a bachelor man and fond of deep subjects—struck back to the starting-point, because, to his busy mind, 'twas more interesting than smells.

"What you say be right, neighbour, as to everybody thinking in their own hearts they be the round peg in the square hole, and hungering after what they lack and scorning what they've got. And, if you take my meaning, it holds so much of gifts of the mind as things of the body and great possessions."

"You go deep, Bonus," said Johnny Rowland, from behind his bar, "but I don't say a word against it. We all want to be different from what we are, somehow, and we all envy something that belongs to our next-door neighbour. I don't mean his turnips, or his rabbits, nor yet his bees, nor nothing like that; but ten to one we see in his character something we'd like to add to our own. We wouldn't confess it for money, but our hearts know the truth of it. And 'tis sure to be so, come to think on't, because if we all see our neighbours' faults so dazzling clear as we do —according to a rule of nature, no doubt, for I've never known it different—then we can't fail to mark their virtues too, if we be honest. And 'tis only human to envy a good thing when we see it."

"And the commandment that says that we mustn't covet his ass or his ox don't forbid us coveting his virtues; for virtue be a thing us all should covet and seek to come by," said Uncle Tom Cobleigh; and never said he anything wiser, though up home ninety year old. We was all silent for a moment, and all, I do believe, rather surprised at our own cleverness to think such fine thoughts; then Johnny, seeing as we weren't drinking—for drinking and deep thinking can't live together—turned the talk into a new channel. The cunning old bird knowed very well that us

men never took such a lot of spirits as when laughing over one of his tales; so now off he went, and while his tongue wagged his eyes was quick as diamonds to mark the empty mug or glass, or the finger that pointed to it.

"You put me in mind of Andrew Blackaller," begins Rowland. "He was the brother of Ned Blackaller—him that keeps the Coach and Horses to Ilsington. Andrew was one of they go-by-the-ground little men, with the look of a pink-eyed mouse about him. A joiner and a Christian with a big heart, and a terrible longing to be other than he was. His eyelashes were white as the wall, and he couldn't see very far from his nose; he stood five feet two inches in boots made special to lift him above the truth of his stature; he was thin and dry as a grasshopper, with a bit of a kick in his speech; and he had nervous tricks, such as spitting in company, and laughing very shrill if ever he see'd a cat. Sane and sound, and gifted with great good sense, nevertheless, but unfortunately deprived of one thing; and so, of course, that one thing he desired above all other things in the world. And when I say he was a joiner and a Christian, and wishful to be other than he was, I don't mean in the particulars of his work or religion—far from it; 'twas only his character that he desired to mend. In a word, Andrew was the awfullest coward that ever felt his heart jump at nought. His life was one long panic, you might say. The postman's knock would flutter him for five minutes, and a telegraph boy turn him faint; while as for standing up for himself afore the nation, or giving as good as he got, a child would have a better idea of doing so than what he had. He fluttered among the people

like a leaf, and was almost frightened to be alive sometimes. And as a natural consequence, no doubt, of all the virtues he loved valour the best, and he would have given his skin to look the world in the face and play the strong man in it without fear or fright. But that was denied him, and his gentle nature made him live with his knees knocking together. The understanding neighbours pitied him, but the coarse everyday sort laughed at him, and said as he ought to be kept in a cage with cotton-wool to sleep in, and bread and milk to eat. And that was pretty much the picture of what he had been while his mother lived; for he was her only one, and she'd brought out his weaknesses, and made him a more pitiful thing than he would have been but for her to stand between him and the world, and temper the wind to her lamb, at any and every cost.

"Now she was dead, and Andy was a master-joiner, and making lots of money, and frightened to name it for fear of the bank breaking.

"The adventure of his life happened to somebody else; and if you think that's a bit like Paddy the Irishman, I'll show you 'tis no less than the truth. You see, valour was poor Blackaller's god, and he'd have gladly gived all his money and goods, and even his great fame at cabinet-making, for an ounce of the devil to strengthen his character; but since that were not to be, for 'tis impossible to make a fighting beast out of such stuff as him, he sought for pluck in others, and liked to know the brave pugnacious men, and was a very good judge of what real pluck meant. Anybody as wasn't afraid of hosses he highly valued, and when Tom Barnes, the cross-country rider, come up for a bit to stop

with his people, Andy set high store upon him, and paid for his drinks, and never wearied of hearing him tell of his adventures, and how a hoss comed down with him and broke his arm-bone, and how he got up again and finished first with only one arm, and so on. Then Slocombe, the runner-up for the light-weight championship of the West Country, was another local man and a great hero of Andrew's; and my cousin, Frederick Rowland, the water bailiff, was another he praised something tremendous, after Fred catched that poacher by the river and took him single-handed to the police station. Yet the poor joiner couldn't get no vartue for himself out of these brave heroes, though time and again they got free drinks out of him.

"Then came a very solemn moment, when the manhood in Andrew cried out to him to wed. He was late in doing so, no doubt, for the man must have been five-and-forty afore he felt the need. And in me he confided, as one never known to make game of anybody.

"Into my bar—in my Princetown days 'twas, not here in Widecombe—into my bar he came, and the place being empty he spoke without waste of words. 'Twas a funny catch he had in his speech, and, along with it, his hands would jump and his feet keep time to 'em.

"'A wife be rising up in my mind, John,' he begins. 'You'm a bachelor, I know, and maybe will say as I'd better bide the same, with my retiring and fearful nature; but there 'tis: something have been saying to me of late that there's no just cause or impediment why I shouldn't do as other men, and take one.'

"'Certainly not,' I said. 'Whatever your

faults, Andrew, a good and kind and loving husband you would surely make; and I'd like for nothing better than to see you standing afore the altar-rails with an understanding she by your side.'

"He trembled at the picture, however.

"'"'Tis what goeth before I fear,' he confessed. 'Once, as you may say in a word, a married man —then I do believe all might be well. Along with my wife, and hid from every eye but God's, I can see myself making a very proper display of wisdom and kindness to her; but 'tis all the long-drawn tribulation that comes firstly. My heart sinks, and yet my soul longs, if you can understand that, Johnny.'

"Well, knowing him, I could understand it. But I didn't throw no dust in his eyes nor speak any word less than the truth.

"'"'Tis a case of faint heart, then,' I told the man, 'and faint heart never won a fair lover. You can't pay nobody to do your courting for you. You must look round and select the female —enough choice in Princetown—and then you must screw up your pluck and have a dash at her with all the manhood you can summon.'

"'"It might be better if I went away to find her,' said Andrew. 'The women know me too well round here. They call me a proper figure of fun, and say many such-like rude things. And one here and there, as would take me for my money and business, might think twice if I offered—for fear of the others laughing at her afterwards.'

"'"No,' I told him, 'the sort as would take you for your money ban't the sort as would hold off for what t'others might say. They laugh who win,' I assured Andrew, 'and nobody cares a

farden damn for the laughter of them who lose. 'Tis only sour grapes, and no more than the wind in the trees, and not to be regarded serious. There's a few, no doubt, would take you at a mouthful; but you don't want that sort. You want——'

"I stopped sudden, because a woman came in the public bar at that instant moment. And I wasn't sorry to be interrupted neither, for when I thought upon it, be blessed if I had the slightest idea what sort of a wife Blackaller really did want. A soft female would spoil him, and do little better than breed more white mice for the next generation to torment; whereas a hard pushing creature would doubtless quench him once for all, and make him poorer-spirited and of less courage than he was a'ready. So I was glad to say no more on that subject and turn to my customer.

"'Twas Sally Campion, the hedge-tacker's daughter, come with a jug from her home out to Rundlestone. Terrible humble folk, of course, as lived in the shadow of the union workhouse, you might say; but Sally had her parts, and, though very near the ugliest girl you ever saw, she was also about the powerfullest. Man's work she did—lifting up they dry-built walls round about—and many and many a stretch of granite that stands up on the Moor to this day was her work. She made very near so much at it as her father did trimming hedges; and she liked the hard labour, and was so jolly and cheerful as need be. A sandy-headed girl with great long arms, strong hands, and a round body. She walked like a man, and cared nought for heat or cold, rain or frost. Her face was so red as a

beet, and she was always singing—out of a gert mouth that went very near ear-wide when she laughed. Little funny eyes she had, without eyelashes, and, but for her voice and short petticoat and big bosom, you'd have thought she was a hulking boy, and not a maid at all.

"She came in cheerful as usual, bought her pint of small beer, and wished me the compliments of the season—for 'twas Christmas-time. She'd been lame the week afore, and I axed her how her mangled foot was.

"'"'Twas nothing at all,' she said. 'Amos Blake, wall-building along with me, thought as I'd catched hold of a stone, and I hadn't, and it falled on my toes lumpus! I danced, I warn 'e. But 'tis well again now.'

"'"You'd best to have doctor to it, all the same, for they evils often go from bad to worse,' declared Blackaller. 'You may get it festering, and that often means death.'

"'"Not I, master! I be so strong as a team of hosses. Nought ever haps to me like that. My flesh be sweet as a nut, and do heal something wonderful.'

"Andrew looked at her curiously, and when she was gone he spoke about her.

"'"A tower of strength, that woman—for one in her own station.'

"'"Good as gold, and a temper like the angels,' I said.

"'"Have she courage, I wonder?' mused Andrew. 'Some women be well known to have it.'

"'"Courage? Yes,' I tells him. 'Courage she must have—to go so cheerful and happy, and singing always, with a face like hers and a father

like hers. A worthless man; while as to her face, 'tis one the like of which is seldom seen for homeliness, though a very kindly expression, I'm sure.'

"'Must stand five foot ten, if an inch,' said the joiner; and I allowed it.

"'And, after all, beauty's only skin-deep,' I told him.

"'So's ugliness,' he said. 'I'm a man that modest that I'd never cocker up to a pretty girl. For why? Because of the rivals. I might go with my money-bags in my hand, no doubt, but my nature turns against such a mean thing as that. Ban't a nice idea to buy a wife, like a pony and trap. And I'm well used to the thought that a beautiful woman would soar higher than me for a mate. But the plain girls—they very well know their market ban't so large, and if any sort of a man gives them the chance of loving him, they'll fasten on him like a limpet at his nod. 'Cause why? 'Cause they've never felt no hope at the best of times, and when they find a male casting his eye upon them they'll burst into a flame and love him, fierce as a tigress, through thick and thin. Yes, they'll love him regular savage—just for the joy and pride and terrible surprise of finding that he loves them.'

"I was a good bit surprised to hear Andy tell so cleverly, and it showed two things: that he'd thought a very great deal upon the subject, and that he'd got his share of wits, even though manly courage had been denied to him.

"'All true, without a doubt,' I answered; 'and as for that girl, behind her red face and little funny eyes, she's got a nice big nature, and in that fine body a very brave heart be beating. No doubt she'll chance on a man with

sense to see her points. There's not a few about with smaller waists and hands, and gentler in speech, as wouldn't shine half so steadfast under the strain of marriage.'

"He went away then, and 'twas the very next day—the very next, if you'll believe me—that the adventure happened.

"'Twas the day before Christmas Eve, to be exact, and Andrew was driving home from Tavistock market in his little pony-cart towards dusk. A red sunset by the same token, and frost in the air and promise of a fine Christmas.

"He'd got three-parts of the way up Merivale Hill when a hugeous strange man stopped him roughly, and Andrew went white as curds and goose-flesh down the spine to hear the rascal call for his money. Just one of they desperate wanderers as crop up in the winter-time, and chance their luck, and make a haul out of some unfortunate wayfarer, or else come to grief and get the worst of it, and find themselves locked up till the winter be over.

"The rogue see'd at a glance that Andy was fair game, and when the shaking man offered him a shilling he grabbed his purse, and at the same time give the joiner a sharp shove and pushed him backwards out of his trap. He screamed with terror, you may be sure, and very near fainted for fright; but then the rascal made off, and Andy, getting his wind, shouted out, 'Thieves! Murder! Help!—Thieves! Murder! Help!' so loud as he knew how.

"Of course, you may cry out like that on Dartmoor pretty often, in a general way, with nought but a gladdy[1] or a crow to hear you; but,

[1] *Gladdy*—a yellow-hammer.

as luck would have it, a man catched Blackaller's shrill screams, and he was a policeman—no less than Joel Ford—him that's inspector at Dousland to this day. He was a slim, active chap, but with no great stopping power in a row. It happened that the vagabond, skipping off down the road, came full on constable in the way, and Ford saw Andrew crying out behind, and the rogue running off as fast as he might; and he put two and two together in a very policeman-like fashion, and stopped the thief.

"Even as he did so, Blackaller was lost in wonder and admiration, for the rogue was a big heavy man, and Ford, though tall, was a light-weight, thin as a viper, and no match for the sturdy villain he stopped. But young Joel didn't think of that. He went for the rascal with the courage of a regiment of soldiers, and got his arms round his neck and dragged him down. There they was in the road, shouting and cussing and kicking each other's shins; and Andrew, in an agony of terror at such a fearful sight, felt his feet root to the earth and his tongue to his lips.

"Ford yelled to him to help; but, of course, the poor soul could no more have thrown himself into such a struggle than he could have tried to stop a runaway horse. He crept nearer in fear and trembling, only to see policeman getting the worst of it; and so he shrieked out again like a frightened hen, and put all his energy into cries and screams. He might very easy have lent a hand and hit the robber while Ford held him, but he hadn't the nerve even to do that. Like a leaf he shook, and his voice quavered on the wind while he bleated loud and long for help.

And then, as none came, he prayed Ford to let go and spare himself worse punishment.

"But there it was: while Ford, under the thief, wasted his breath cussing Blackaller for a cowardly dog as deserved to lose all he'd got, the joiner's cry was answered, and from a bit away out on the Moor he see'd a fluttering thing, and first thought 'twas a pony, and then a scarecrow. But it turned out to be a woman, and his heart sank again, for well he knew this was no woman's work. He danced around the fighters, to see Ford, though failing fast, still hanging on to t'other and getting it heavy in the face for his pains; then he yowled to the woman that murder was being done, and told her to run for her life and find a man if she could. But instead, she held on herself, and soon he saw 'twas Sally Campion.

"Her sunbonnet had falled off, and her scant sandy mane was down her back by the time she got there; and Andy cried to her how the rogue on top had stole his purse, and how the officer had stopped him.

"'For God's sake, run, since you be young and quick—run, run, and find a man, or else this poor policeman——'

"So far he got, and then he stopped and shook with terror and wonder.

"Because Sally saw very clear that it weren't no time to trot about finding friends for Ford. In fact, the chap was on his back with his bolt shot. The robber had just gived him a cruel blow in the throat, and poor Joel began to spread out and flatten and get limp. No doubt the heavier man would have been clear in another minute—with Andy's purse and all—if Sally

hadn't took up the story. Before he could rise off Ford's carcass, she'd got to him, and clenched her great hand and hit him a swinging crack in the jaw, as would have killed a sheep at the least. No open fingers, like a female, mind you, but a good clenched fist, and all her shoulder weight behind the hit. Her arms were like iron, along of her wall-building, and afore the thief could get up and go for her she hit him again. Then, seeing Ford's truncheon within reach of her hand, she grabbed it, and got a proper heavy welt home on the highwayman's head. That shook him bad, but he was on his feet by now, and he'd tore free of the policeman and meant running. He started, but he'd had a sharp dose, and was like a drunken man. For a minute he stood still and reeled; then he pulled himself together and tried to go on. And Sally went after him!

"Blackaller, seeing her rash idea, squeaked out to her to let well alone; but she scorned the thought. She had a badly wounded man afore her, and she was more than his match by that time, and she knowed that right was her side also. She over-got him very quick, for she could run like a long-dog [1]; and then she shrieked at him if he didn't give himself up to her she'd make him. He grunted at that, and ran on; and then she hit him on the shoulder, and he turned to get inside the truncheon and throttle her if he could. But she was far too quick and strong. Never did a woman have such a nerve afore, I reckon, for she fought him at close quarters, and, after she'd got one proper wipe on the front of her face that nearly knocked her eyes into her

[1] *Long-dog*—greyhound.

head, she landed fair and square on his wicked skull with the truncheon in her turn, and then, while he was trying not to fall, she hammered his head again and fetched him down. Twice more she struck him—to make sure as he shouldn't come to again—and then she cried out to Blackaller to fetch the reins from his pony and tie the man's legs and wrists afore he woke up to more mischief.

"But Andy was shaking like a lump of jelly, with his blood turned to water by that time, and he couldn't speak, let alone act; so she ran like lightning for the cart, and fetched it up to the fallen man, and had a leather thong round his ankles and another round his arms afore he got back his senses and groaned aloud and said he was dying. And she drew the thongs home, too, and bit into the wicked scoundrel's flesh, till he freshened up wonderful and began to cuss and to swear.

"And policeman Ford helped in the great capture, for he was on his feet again long afore now. He helped, and he praised Sally with all his might, and shook the robber's coat, and turned out Mr. Blackaller's purse, with eight sovereigns and a dollop of silver in it.

"Then Blackaller had another shock, because Ford, who was bruised very bad and had lost a pint of blood, turned on him most furious, and called him a slack-twisted, cowardly jackal, as ought to blush to bear the name of man.

"'For a flea-bite, I'd give you as bad as that rascal give me!' said Ford, forgetting his policeman's duty for the moment. 'Why, Guy Fawkes alive!' he says, 'if it hadn't been for this here woman, I'd have lost my life, very like;

and you standing there wringing your silly hands and fluttering about like a shirt on a clothes-line! A beastlier, shamefuller, cowardlier sight I never saw,' he says. ''Tis a disgrace to the nation that such a creature as you should be allowed to walk about in a man's clothes!'

"And a lot more like that Ford gave Blackaller; because, you see, the joiner wasn't known to him, and he didn't understand the infirmity of the poor man's flesh, and how powerless he was in such a catastrophe.

"But, whatever else he might be, Andrew was valiant at money-giving. In fact, a generous soul, who never feared to break a golden sovereign in a good cause.

"He told policeman that he was cruel sorry his weak nerves prevented him from any act of valour, though he greatly admired it in other people. He said, 'If you offered me the Bank of England, I couldn't have struck that man—no, not if he'd been killing my grandmother instead of you! 'Tis a sad lack in me, but courage be left out of my nature, and the sight of blood always makes me go faint. But you be the stuff that heroes be made of, policeman, and I'm going to ask you to take five pounds of this money for your share of this here fine job. Not a penny less shall you have; and if the law allows you to sell your truncheon that this woman used so valiant as David afore Goliath—if it lies within the power of the law to sell to me that truncheon, I'll buy it, and think no figure in reason too high!'

"Ford calmed down a good bit with the five pounds in his hands, and reckoned as the truncheon might be bought at a price.

"'And as for you, Miss Sally Campion,' says Blackaller, 'the like of what you did no female ever done afore. And you'm a very wonderful creature, Sally, and a mother for heroes.'

"She laughed at that. She was still shaking a good bit with the excitement.

"'Must be a wife afore you'm a mother, if you be my sort,' she said.

"'A very witty answer,' declared the policeman, while he wiped the blood off his face; 'and if I wasn't tokened to a good girl a'ready, I'd offer for you, young woman—face and all—and chance it.'

"'Let that be,' spoke Andrew, 'and leave her reward to me. 'Tis for you and me to get this anointed villain into my trap and drive him to Princetown; for he'll have to see a doctor afore they can punish him. And as for you, Sally Campion, my fine dear, you can look for me to-night at your house to have a tell along with you and your father.'

"'Twas left at that, and the culprit they drove to Princetown, and found as he'd got a concussion; and great credit and renown came to Sally, as a matter of course, when Blackaller and Ford blazed abroad that the concussion was all her work. And that same night, after 'twas dark, did Andrew march off to the cot of the Campions.

"'Dammy!' he says to himself, 'with such terrible brave doings in the air, why for shouldn't I show a spark of courage for once in my life?' And so, indeed, he did, for not only did he travel two mile out and two mile home in the dark—a thing he very much dreaded at best—but he offered on the spot for Sally, and told her that, in his opinion, she'd make him a very good,

useful wife. And he told her that beauty was only skin-deep and of no account in his eyes, but that bravery belonged to the heart, and that he set more store upon it than any other human virtue.

"She couldn't believe her ears, of course, to think that a man in Blackaller's position, with a prosperous business and a brother a publican, and so on, should want such a woman as her for a wife. It seemed a sort of dream of nonsense, and far, far too wonderful and lucky to be true. In fact, she lost her nerve a bit over it, and what the chap on the Moor couldn't do, Andy done, for she was frighted, and went pale behind her brick-red skin.

"'Marry the likes of me, Mr. Blackaller!' she said. 'Why, I'm only a know-nought gert fool, and hardly a shift or smurry to my back, and only good for building stone walls and such-like.'

"'Don't you tell me that,' he answers. 'You be good for a great many fine things, and too good for some. In fact, you'm too good for my wife, I do assure you, for you ought to marry a brave man—so terrible brave as you be. But as far as that goes, no doubt, if I was to live along with you, I might get to feel more courageous myself in course of years; and, be that as 'twill, you have pluck enough for two—or ten, for that matter.'

"'You'll think better of this come to-morrow,' she said, looking at his pink and excited face with a good bit of doubt. In fact, her voice shook a lot, as Andy allowed after. 'You'll think better of this by Christmas. 'Tis just the excitement, and so on. You be grateful to me, and all that; but 'twas nothing I done; and, come presently, you'll feel you've gone too far and got

above yourself. Then you'll want to cry off, and you will cry off, and then the folk will laugh at me.'

"But he very soon showed her she was wrong. He braced her up to a better conceit of herself, for she'd never thought of a man, or dreamed that so much as a day-labourer would have any use for her, let alone a tradesman, with a brother a publican.

"'You'd be a boon and a blessing to any man, as the saying is,' declared Andrew, 'and if you'll have me, I shall feel myself the luckiest chap in Princetown; and, in a word, I won't take "no" for an answer, Sally.'

"A picture she must have looked that night when he offered for her, for the blow the robber had gived her had swelled up her nose and blacked both her eyes; but Blackaller, though a man easily terrified by most things, made nought of her fearsome appearance. She was a female, and a proper brave one, and that was all he cared about; and he longed to have her in his house as the crown of the establishment.

"She took him in fear and trembling—for till the ring was on her finger I do believe she thought he'd change his mind. Indeed, Sally said she wouldn't have blamed him much if he had done so; but, of course, he didn't; and well was the man rewarded, for he got a lot more than a plucky wife with Sally Campion. That he could love her made her love him, just as Andy himself had said to me in my bar; and she did love him, with such a passionate, hungry, and steadfast fire that she'd have laid down her life for him, and fought the world single-handed for him if she'd been called to do it.

"The highwayman recovered, and got six months, and Blackaller bought the truncheon for ten shillings. It was put up as a masterpiece of decoration in his parlour, and he valued it, next to Sally, as the most precious thing he had in the world."

XIV

HALF-MAST

'TWAS MOSES BUTT astonished us one fine night by suddenly axing a question—a most uncommon thing for him to do.

"Hast heard of late about they Tucketts?" he said to Gregory Snow. But Greg had not; no more had I.

Johnny Rowland knew about 'em, however, and he was able to tell Moses Butt that they'd left Widecombe and gone down Ashburton way.

"A roving stone be that man," said Johnny. "He's tried the sea and the land; but nothing much has come of it so far."

"Mercy Tuckett's a patient woman," declared Samuel Bonus, who knew 'em.

"Wasn't always, however," answered Johnny. And then he told us this yarn about the Tucketts in their earlier days, when they lived to Daleham and he was a fisherman.

"You must think of Mercy and her husband as a lot younger," he began. "And you must fancy you see a little cottage—semi-detached—perched up on Daleham cliff. And you must suppose you be listening to Mercy's rather high-pitched voice, dressing down Fred for all he's worth. And don't you suppose that I be libelling

either one or t'other of 'em, for I ban't. I had the tale from Mercy herself."

Then away went Johnny, imitating Mrs. Tuckett like this :

"'And if you think 'twas a proper or a manly or an honest thing to go gallivanting to a fair without your wife, then I'll tell you it wasn't; and if you be going to enjoy whole days of your life away from me, I'll soon make the village ring with it, and let them as fancy you're a proper husband know what you really are!'

"Mercy Tuckett withered him like that for half an hour, and her husband sat and listened with every outward sign of regret. Once, while she paused to take breath, a faint murmur was heard through the party wall of the Tuckett home, and the man smiled.

"'I should much like to know what you're grinning at!' cried Mercy. 'At your own wicked thoughts, no doubt. However, there's a time coming, Frederick, when you'll grin on the wrong side of your face, if I'm anybody!'

"'Twasn't that,' he answered; 'but if you'll shut your mouth a minute you'll hear Mrs. Leaman next door dressing down Jack just the same as you be dressing down me. Him and me often compare notes after a breeze ashore, and 'tis just a toss of a ha'penny whether you or Jane Leaman have the sharpest tongue.'

"'Is it? And who sharpened 'em? He's so bad as you; and if you shouldn't hear the ugly truth in your homes, where should you hear it? You work together in the boat and conspire wickedness against your wives, and only us and God Almighty knows what you both are, for you hoodwink everybody else, and the people think

you're a pair of pattern husbands, and little guess what 'tis behind the scenes.'

"'That's true,' said the man, warming up, 'because Jack and me be a lot too proud to tell 'em; but if 'twas known what a hell of a time we have——'

"He stopped and cooled down again.

"'But there, I ban't going to quarrel. Jack and me made a mistake, and we be sorry for it, so enough said.'

"'Not at all! You shan't pass it off with sorrow. I know too well what your sorrow is worth. Lasts till you be out of sight of your home and no longer.'

"''Tis the best I can do, Mercy. After all, what was the crime? We ran the boat into Torbay because the wind skewed and we couldn't get back to Daleham. And we sold the fish and went ashore and found that Brixham Fair was going on, so we had a bit of a spree. Who wouldn't? You didn't expect us to telegraph for you and Jane? And I brought you home a fairing, and Jack fetched home two cocoanuts for his wife, and what the deuce more you could expect——'

"'I expected you to remember what you said when you married me,' answered Mercy, and she jawed at him until Mr. Tuckett rose, lost his temper, and prepared to depart.

"'You'll drive me mad with your trash! I thought I'd married a sane woman, not a ninny-hammer. Talk—talk—talk—and all tomfoolery at that! Look round—look round, woman, and listen to a few other men's wives, and hear a bit about what men are—not what you think they should be. Who be you, that have been wedded

a bare year, to lay down the whole law and the prophets about husbands? You're a fool—a noisy, clacking, narrow-minded fool, and you don't know your luck. And I'll tell you this: I'm sick of it—sick and tired of it. I've a good mind to sail to-night and drop over the side after dark, and get the peace under the sea I can't get ashore—like poor Luke Sweet did last month. Then you'll begin to understand what life means, and see if 'tis better to be a widow than a wife.'

"The fairing that he had brought her stood on the table, and he picked it up, flung it on the floor, and stamped his foot on it. The gift was a large box of chocolate creams; and treated that way it left some work for his wife.

"'Where are you going?' she cried, as he took his hat from the table. 'You haven't been in the house an hour.'

"'No; and that was an hour too long. I don't know where I'm going, and don't care, so 'tis out of reach of your tongue,' says Fred.

"He left his home and descended to the quay. Daleham be like a swallow's nest sticking to the hill, and, far below it, the fleet of boats rocked together outside a little harbour. It was Saturday, and most of them had returned for the week-end. Some lay at the quayside; some rode at anchor; a few were homeward bound.

"Fred Tuckett and his partner, John Leaman, shared a small trawler. Each had married within the year; each had saved money and prospered at his business; each had won a bit of money with his wife. But certain little errors of outlook on the side of Mercy and Jane promised to bring all to ruin. The women were school-friends and saw alike. Their youth, hot temper, and general

inexperience of the male animal was breeding trouble. They lived side by side, and the wives were the best of friends; but they lacked power to help each other, since they looked at life from exactly the same standpoint and were ever in extremes.

"Now, as Frederick Tuckett passed his mate's door, the mournful mug of Jack Leaman met his gaze, framed between a red geranium and a red cactus in the parlour window. His features, too, were red, but while the flowers looked cheerful, Jack's face, with its fiery cheeks and tawny, fan-shaped beard, lacked either hope or cheer.

"Mr. Tuckett, who was skipper, and from force of character took the lead, signalled to Jack; whereupon t'other man gladly joined him. The red chap spoke.

"'I heard yours going it when mine stopped to fetch her breath,' he said.

"'Yes; and I heard yours. It can't last much longer. I'm losing my self-respect, Jack, and I lost my temper afore I left her.'

"'I should have done the same if I'd got one. 'Tis us that be to blame, Frederick. Us didn't ought to have married Ilfracombe women. No good comes from the north.'

"Mr. Leaman was superstitious, you see.

"'I lost my temper,' repeated Fred. 'I said that some fine night I'd go to sea and make a hole in the water. And then I left her.'

"'Funny you should have spoke that! I didn't lose my temper—having none to lose. But, in a lull, I up and said: "Look here, Jane, enough be so good as a feast—and enough I've had. There's your cocoanuts and here be I, and neither mortal man nor boat can stand more than the

weather they're built to stand. Your voice gets on my nerves like a dog barking in the night," I said to my wife, "and if there's much more of it," I said, "I won't be accountable for my actions." 'Twas strong, no doubt, but she called me the disgrace of Daleham and a blot on English manhood, and a red tom-cat—me that never looked at a female before or since I looked at her!'

"'"'Tis all wrong, and they'll live to find it out; and the sooner the better for our peace of mind,' declared Fred. 'And now I'm going to larn mine a sharp lesson, and I guess you'll do the like. We haven't been off the sea an hour, and I be going straight to sea again this minute. So come on.'

"'"What about Ted Soper?'

"'"Ted can stop ashore. We'll go without him. 'Tis just to larn 'em a sharp lesson, I tell you.'

"'"Anything that will do that I'm agreeable to,' assented the other.

"'"God's light! my mother-in-law's an angel of sense compared to my wife,' burst out Tuckett, as they reached the quay. 'Mrs. Priestley's got more patience in her finger than Mercy have in her whole head.'

"'"Same with my wife's mother; 'tis the force of age and experience in 'em. Come childer——'

"'"You can't say that. Your wife's got one.'

"'"One's no use, by all accounts. One makes 'em conceited and full of airs and graces. But when they run into double figures, then the gilt's off the gingerbread, and they begin to understand what life means.'

"'"Talking of gingerbread, I was that savage that I flinged Mercy's fairing on the floor and set my

heel in it. A proper mess, I warn 'e! And then I got up and marched out.'

"'The cocoanuts wasn't a success, neither,' confessed Mr. Leaman. 'Jane asked me whether I thought she was a squirrel, to eat such trash, and I forgot myself for the minute and said I wished to God she was, because then I should know what to do with her.'

"They walked down the quay together, and met an old man called Tom Soper. He was bent and withered and very thin. His voice croaked, and his matter was generally of the mournfullest. Cheerful news didn't interest him; indeed, a lifetime of experience had taught him that it interested nobody.

"'Nought on earth be less exciting to human nature in general than other people's good luck,' Mr. Soper once declared in a full bar, and not a man denied it.

"Now he lifted his small and withered head and cried in a voice sad as a curlew's :

"'Have 'e heard the news, Frederick? That poor wretch, Abel Ball, have got another child. They be like thistles, they Balls be—can't live without increasing. But I say 'tis only weeds have such a lot of childer.'

"'They'm a happy couple, however,' declared Jack Leaman. 'Never was a pair that went better together.'

"'Fools—fools and don't know it. To breed paupers be socialism, in my opinion, and something ought to be done against it. But I'm talking to——'

"He broke off and hastened down a side street. They heard him shout to a hump-backed sailor who had just come off the sea.

"'Have 'e heard the news, Samuel? That poor wretch, Abel Ball, have got another child. They be like thistles——'

"Mr. Soper was on the quay again, however, before Fred and Jack started. He showed surprise, interest, and anger to larn that they were going fishing o' Saturday night.

"'And the Lord's day to-morrow! 'Tis men like you bring the hand of Heaven against Daleham and ruin the fishery. And when I think of the burning light by night and the pillar of cloud by day that your father was, Frederick, I'm very much surprised and shocked. And as for my grandchild, Ted Soper, I shan't suffer him to go along in your boat no more if 'tis to be Sunday fishing.'

"'The case is peculiar,' explained Fred; 'and I ban't going to tell you nothing about it, Uncle Soper, because you'd croak a lot of nonsense from one end of Daleham to t'other in half an hour if I did. But we've a good reason for going to sea, and we don't want Ted; and very like we shan't drop the trawl afore Monday, if then. 'Tis private business, and there's an end of it.'

"'If you be going smuggling to France——' began Uncle Soper.

"Frederick Tuckett laughed.

"'That's the idea—that'll do capital, uncle! You tell the people that me and Jack have gone to France and be going to bring over a brave boatload of lace and brandy and cigars!'

"'And what will your wives say?' asked Soper.

"'Can't tell you, as we shan't be there to know,' answered Fred.

"In an hour the men went to sea, and their

'dandy' rigged vessel, *The Provider*, stole away between the harbour heads.

"She flashed back the light of evening from her red sails, and soon was gone.

"Then Uncle Soper hastened up the hill, and presently marked the neighbour wives together at their cottage doors.

"Mercy talked and Jane suckled a red-haired baby.

"'Good evening—have 'e heard the news?' he began, stretching out his eager beak and scratching his whiskers. 'That poor wretch, Abel Ball, have got another child, and glories in it—the fool! And what I say is, they Balls be like thistles—can't live without increasing. But 'tis only weeds that get such a lot of childer.'

"Then Uncle Soper told them how their husbands had just set sail.

"'''Tis all wrong, and won't come to no good,' he declared. 'And you women ought to have more power over 'em. Such greed will surely overreach itself and land 'em in trouble.'

"'Gone to sea!' exclaimed Jane. 'Never!'

"It happened, however, that *The Provider* was now plainly visible. Both women tried to hide their concern, but they failed.

"'We had some words,' confessed Mrs. Leaman. 'Jack went to Brixham Fair and played about with—Lord knows who, and I was angry for certain. And who wouldn't be?'

"'But the milk of an angry woman is poison to her babe,' declared Uncle Soper, pointing to the infant at Mrs. Leaman's breast. 'Don't you ever get angry till that infant be weaned, else 'twill turn the marrow in his bones to gall and ruin his constitution. 'Twas so with me, though

I've struggled on to seventy-six. I should be twice the man I am if my mother hadn't been such a famous firebrand.'

"He went off, and Jane and Mercy looked at one another and at the vanishing boat.

"They regarded each other, and each put a silent question, and neither answered.

"'"'Tis just to trouble us, and for no other reason,' declared Mercy. 'But I won't be troubled, and don't you be, Jane.'

"'"Jack said that he'd so soon go into the water as not, afore he went out.'

"'"Silly creature! And Fred talked just the same nonsense. 'Tis to frighten us, and a very feeble sort of foolishness at that. But don't you be frightened, and don't you fret. They'll be back with their tails between their legs come morning. 'Tis now or never with 'em, and my Aunt Susan says that a man learns more in the first year of his married life than ever afore or after; so you and me will both go on teaching 'em sense and reason while 'tis the accepted time for it.'

"But Jane was doubtful. She watched the trawler, and her eyes began to grow dim. Presently she went into her home, that Mercy might not see her tears.

"Left alone, the childless woman also drooped a bit. She remembered the last scene; her heart softened a little, and she grew sad before twilight came.

"She had got Fred his favourite Sunday dinner.

"In t'other home Jane was hugging her baby and crying about one thing while she pretended to herself that she was crying about another, as women will.

"'Did the ugly, bad old man say that mother would poison her tibby lamb, then? Mother would die a thousand times afore she'd poison her li'l Johnny,' says Jane to the babe.

"Then Sunday came, but *The Provider* did not. Friends, with good intention in some cases and mixed motives in others, called to cheer up the young wives. They were crestfallen and sad and properly down on their luck by that time. Both feared the worst, but didn't know what shape 'twould take.

"On Monday night it was blowing hard, and their young eyes ached with long scanning of the waves. They slept together to hearten each other.

"Not till Tuesday did the full measure of their trouble come, and then a man well used to the work brought it.

"Among Uncle Soper's virtues was early rising, and at dawn on Tuesday he stood at the quay-head, watching the fleet put forth on the tide. Thus, though his aged sight could not enjoy the promise of woe, his ears were the first to hear of it, and his legs were swift to carry the tidings where they must be least welcome.

"Young Ted Soper, a bit troubled by the absence of *The Provider*, in which he was third hand, now scanned the sea impatiently, and presently he saw his boat returning. She approached, and loomed up large through the morning haze. There had blown half a gale of wind from the west since Monday morn, but to-day the sky was clear and the sea rolled, with nothing but a ground swell to mark the vanished storm.

"Then Ted made a discovery.

"'Jimmery! She've got her flag half-masted, gran'faither!'

"The ancient woke into life on the instant.

"'Half-mast! Half-mast! That means death! Be sure you're seeing straight, afore I carry the news like a flame of fire!'

"Others said the same as Ted, and there looked to be no doubt that *The Provider* was bringing back trouble. She crawled in very slowly on the lazy dawn wind, and Uncle Soper declared that to his eye she had a hang-dog look, as though ashamed to return to port.

"'Mark me,' he said. 'She was catched in that heavy weather, and only them two aboard, and they've carried away something, and one of 'em's drownded! Poor women! Poor women! I'll get up over the hill this instant moment!'

"'Bide here!' shouted a fisherman. 'What's the sense of putting 'em both in a tear till we know which 'tis? At worst 'tis only one of 'em have got to suffer.'

"But Uncle would not stay.

"''Tis better as they should both be prepared. I'm an old man, and I know wiser than you young ones,' he piped back.

"Jane and Mercy were at their doors. They had seen *The Provider*, but knew not that her little flag flew at half-mast.

"'Here's our boat coming home at last, Uncle Soper,' said Jane.

"'Too well I know it, my poor dears—too well I know it!' he gasped. 'Let me catch my wind, for I've lost it fighting the hill to break the awful news. Her flag's flying at half-mast! She's bringing death—death along with her. You mustn't hope—there's no call to hope. You must face it, as better than you and poorer than you have had to do. In a word, one of 'em—

Fred or Jack—God He only knows which—is a goner. They would go to sea short-handed. But you——'

"He found himself alone. Mercy Tuckett was already running down the hill, and Jane, staying to dart indoors and shut the door on her sleeping child, followed.

"Uncle felt regretful that he had not delayed the morsel a bit longer, but set off after them again as quickly as possible. He hoped to be back on the quay afore *The Provider's* boat came ashore.

"The old man was just in time. *The Provider's* dinghy had arrived, and she brought the dust of a dead man with her and two living ones.

"Two wives sobbed on two men's bosoms, while they told how the cod of *The Provider's* trawl had caught and brought back to light a corpse.

"'''Tis poor Luke Sweet—him as slipped over the side of *The Good Hope* a month agone,' explained Mr. Tuckett. 'Us only knowed him by his boots.'

"'He'd far better have bided at the bottom of the sea,' declared Uncle Soper. 'For Christian burial's out of the question now. 'Tis well known he took his own life because Annie Westerbrook hadn't got no use for him; and 'twill be a very indecent act and a premium on sin if parson puts him under with "sure and certain."'

"And Jack and Jane and Fred and Mercy went home mighty close together."

XV

THE SILVER BULLET

I

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO the tidal waters of the Dart looked much the same as they do now, and Stoke Gabriel, the little village over against Bow Creek, haven't changed more than the river, that flows past its white and rose washed cots, where they nestle round about the church tower. The orchard lands be white in spring with snowy bloom, and red and yellow when autumn comes; and the plough climbs up over, turning the red earth of the fields; and the gulls and rooks follow the furrow and get their meat as they go—same as their great-great-grandfathers did afore them.

In fact nought's changed but the people and the thatch of the cottages; and some of that be a hundred years old under the moss and house-leeks that hold it together; but the folk are changed, and if you can read his death date on the slate of Reuben Trenchard, 'tis about all you will do.

In the sunny side of the burying-ground he lies, and the grey birds pull worms out of his grave a lot easier than his neighbours ever pulled shillings out of his pocket. For he was a hard

sort of man by all accounts, though a great stickler for the Faith and a great believer that nought happens unplanned.

'Twas more than a hundred years ago since the adventure of their lives happened to him and his wife and children; for two children and a wife he had; and the boy took after Mrs. Trenchard, a nervous, high-strung creature, and the girl didn't take after nobody, but seemed a bit of a changeling from the first.

Reuben was red and grizzly and rugged as a bear; but a terrible Old Testament man—staunch to the letter of the Word, and knew no shadow of changing; while Hester, his wife, was a gentle, shadowy sort of soul, with a pleading face. A silent woman, as that man's wife was bound to be; but according to his lights he loved her very well. She respected him and done her duty and minded her business, and took joy of her children till they grew to be seventeen and nineteen years old. Then, along of their father, more than themselves, they began to be a source of trouble, and often in sore moments their mother confessed to a neighbour that she wished she had never borne 'em. As for Noah Trenchard, he belied his name, for he hadn't got no use for the water except to swim in, and, whereas it was a very usual thing for Dart-side boys to go to sea and man the battleships always calling out for men in those fighting times, Noah never felt drawn that way. He was built like his mother, tall, strong, wiry, and so nervous as a gentleman's thorough-bred hoss. Grey eyes, thin cheeks, and sleek, straw-coloured hair he had, and he was a dreamer by nature and hard to neighbour with. Wasn't cut out for manual labour exactly,

but, since Trenchard farmed a hundred acres along with his other activities, to it Master Noah went, though he'd rather have been in some trade or craft and cared little for farming. But in them days a parent's word meant something, and it never came over Noah to go counter to his father for many a year.

Joyce Trenchard was the girl—a night-black maid, darker than most English maidens, with a lot of character and a great power of keeping her opinions to herself. She was handsome, with just a look of her father turned to beauty. His angle of jaw she had, but, whereas in him 'twas hard as a prison wall, in her case 'twas round and just strong enough to show courage and no more. Big flashing black eyes and a brown skin and great strength of body belonged to Joyce. She worked in the house and was a very obedient, steady creature; and if she cherished her own opinions for the future and thought upon a husband and freedom some day, she kept her hopes a secret. None had courted her so far, for the men in Stoke Gabriel were a humble folk, and they very well knew there was none nearer than Dartmouth or Totnes that would be big enough to satisfy Reuben for a son-in-law. A love the maiden had, however, and that was for her brother. She thought a lot of him, and believed that if he ever had pluck to break away from his father and find something to do that would bring out his great natural cleverness, he'd make his mark in the world. But it didn't look likely, and at the beginning of this strange tale both young things were in the old man's black books and doing all they knew to get round him and make him forgive 'em.

There mother helped; but it was difficult, for Reuben didn't find forgiveness come easy, and so terrible sure was he at all times of his own judgment and opinion, backed by Gospel support, that an idea, once in his head, took a powerful deal of patience and handling before you got it out again.

'Twas at a time when the shadow of Boney had fallen like a blight on England; and in the West Country everybody was shaking in their shoes for fear that his dreaded fleet of flat-bottomed boats would make their dash and land a French army in Devon between nightfall and cock-light some fine day. Dartmouth hummed like a hive of bees, and up to Berry Head, overlooking Torbay, a good few thousand men were building a fortress with walls pierced for heavy guns to withstand the terror if he tried. And Reuben's quarrel with his boy was just this: he held that it ill became any son of his to be loafing on the land when the manhood and might of England did ought to be on the sea. The navy was crying for sailors, and Trenchard wanted for his son to go; but Noah explained so well as he could that he'd be no manner of use in a battleship, or anywhere else if there was fighting to be done. He didn't lack for nerve or goodwill; but fighting was foreign to his nature. He offered to go and do clerk's work at Dartmouth, or anything to help the nation; but he begged his father not to drive him to sea, because very well he knew nought would come of it, and he'd prove no credit to his family nor help to his country.

So that was Trenchard's trouble with Noah, and the bother with Joyce happened quite different and was even more serious. She'd

made friends with a wise woman that lived over the river to Tuckenhay, up Bow Creek—an old creature who dealt in spells to cure ills in beasts and humans, and had been known also to wake love between men and women by giving 'em magic drinks. She knew a powerful lot of wondrous things hid from common people, and could read the hand and tell a boy or girl their future. And there's no doubt she dealt in evil also, and had over-looked more than one just person and ill-wished cattle in her time. She'd been publicly ducked once and very near died; but you can't drown a witch, as is well known. After her punishment, however, she was said to have given up her evil ways; but Reuben never believed it and properly foamed at the mouth when he found out that Joyce had been to see her. Indeed, such a fearful view of the matter did he take that he did a thing contrary to all reason and beat his seventeen-year-old daughter.

"You godless wretch!" he cried out. "To go in broad day to that witch—a creature as would have been burned at the stake a few years ago, and should be to-morrow if I had the power to do it! A foul child of the devil, as flies by night and does her master's work and helps men to the gallows and women to hell! Please God it ain't too late to save you by scourging, Joyce Trenchard; and if ever you breathe the same air with that hag again I'll cast you out of my house and own you no more and deny as I've got a daughter."

He flogged her and she stood it, then staggered away, bruised and dazed and frightened out of her seven senses, for though she knew her father hated witches and wizards and such like, and

believed everything against a wise man or woman, she never guessed or thought he felt so right-down religious mad against 'em.

She'd gone to the old creature for fun and had her fortune told, and heard how she'd marry a fair man and be the mother of ten; but she'd took it all as a joke, and 'twas a cruel eye-opener to her when she found what an awful wicked thing she'd done. In fact, she was feared for the first time in her life—not at her furious father, but at the thought she'd been playing with fire and running her young soul into danger. She was ignorant, of course, and took her religion like all else from Reuben's hand; so her heart was sore as her back, poor girl, for a good bit, and she prayed with all her might in church that she might be forgiven. She wept a good many secret tears about it, and so did her mother, and neither of 'em felt very comfortable till Reuben reckoned the danger was past.

Noah, on the quiet, tried to cheer Joyce up, and said he didn't believe the old granny to Tuckenhay was a witch at all; but his sister trusted her father.

"'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,'" said Reuben one night when they were all together after supper, and he smoked his 'churchwarden' and took his tot of Dutch spirit. "That's the word of God, and in the good old times, when the first James ruled over this country, they didn't suffer 'em to live. Now law and religion be both gone so weak that all manner of things happen that never ought; and what's the result? Why, Boney be loosed against England for our sins; and God, He only can tell how far the Man of Wrath will be allowed to triumph. And too

well I know there's witches in our midst this moment, plotting with France and Apollyon against us; and we go on in our godless way and take no steps against 'em."

Mrs. Trenchard shivered so she couldn't thread her needle, and Joyce done it for her.

"How d'you know, father?" she asked.

"I know what I know," he answered. "I little like to speak of it. Yet none need fear the truth. And the truth be only that last winter, as I was coming back over Fire Beacon Hill to Dittisham for to take the ferry and get home, the night surprised me. Then, on the very top of the hill, at that famous place called the 'Witches' Ring,' I heard 'em already moving in the air above me. Such a whistling and screeching and flapping never was, and, old as I am, I was tempted to take to my heels. But I put my trust in God and scorned the powers of evil, and kept my steadfast gait and soon left the wretches behind. Hags from all around was gotten together there to meet their Master, and no doubt, if I'd been night-foundered and come that way, I'd have seen their Sabbath horrors in full swing."

Hester shivered and her daughter's eyes grew round, but Noah didn't seem to trouble. In his heart he doubted not that the old man had took his full of cordial afore he started and heard no more than the night wind on the heath, or a screech owl in the spinney; but he said nought, for Reuben weren't one to be contradicted at his own hearth—or any other place, for that matter.

Then, not a fortnight after, one eventide, there came news like wildfire that a ship of the line had

called at Dartmouth. Everybody knew pretty well what that meant, and the tough young chaps in the outlying villages made themselves scarce and either hid in the cider presses or hay lofts, or lonely barns and linhays far from the river. Well they understood the *Sea Swallow* hadn't called for fun.

A noble sight she was, and if you've seen the old *Britannia* training ship, afore she was sold out of the navy for firewood, you've only to clap on three masts and a great towering mountain of snowy sails billowing around 'em, to see the fighting ship of the old days.

At dusk she came through Dartmouth Heads, and, before the people well knew what had happened, three pinnaces were down on the water with twenty men in each. And the boats slipped up the river to try their luck at Dittisham and at Stoke Gabriel, Tuckenhay, and Duncannon. The press-gang wasted no time, for they knew their work and understood that surprise was the secret of success. Eight men they took out of Dittisham, and the rumour of the warship had hardly got to the next village when a man-o'-war's boat slipped alongside the little pier and the sailors swept through Stoke Gabriel like rats through a rick.

Noah Trenchard was coming home-along when he fell into a party of four, and he very near fainted, for this was the first he'd heard of it. But Joyce, who'd run for her life to the field where he'd been ploughing all day, had missed him, for he'd turned homeward by another road; and when she got back the raid was done and the pinnace off again with four chaps, including Noah. And one they took was Benny Trivett,

the only son of his widowed mother; and two were brothers, the sons of John Life, the publican.

A rare rumpus, I promise you, and everybody in the streets cussing the war; and a free fight or two followed, for some was glad the young fellows had been catched, and when other lads turned up, who had escaped, and went in to the Silver Salmon—John Life's public—to brag about their cleverness, they found him in a proper tantara about his loss, and his wife next thing to out of her mind.

Joyce heard the evil news and went home raving with it, because she knew the manner of man that Noah was, and understood what a senseless and wicked thing had been done to take such a mild-mannered and nervous soul to fight the French. But when Reuben heard it he didn't mourn or protest. In fact, he never so much as pretended he was put about.

"I'm glad," he said. "I'm thankful to God that this have overtook Noah, and I dare you women to lament either afore me or behind my back. I won't have it," he said, "and I command you to rejoice for the salvation of my son and the credit of the family. Long ago he ought to have gone forth in his youth and strength to fight for his country and his kin. 'Twas his place to do his share to quell these ungodly people, and that Son of Belial, Boney; and now he's called to the task by the will of his Maker, for nothing happens by chance, and he'll fight with the best and shine with the highest. 'Twill make a man of him worthy to be my son, and I'll have no tears or sighs about it, but quite the contrary."

Well, that was all right from his point of view; but you can't command a robbed mother to

rejoice nor yet a loving sister to be happy when their all be took from them.

"See him again I shall not—of that I'm certain sure," said Mrs. Trenchard, and she went to her bed in the bitterest agony. Her only chance had been to drown her grief in a flood of tears and cry herself to sleep, or else kneel on her knees all night calling on the Almighty to watch and guard her son. But that poor comfort was denied her, for Reuben brooked no sorrow when he chose to be cheerful, and cheerful he was, or pretended to be. He read a bit of the Bible full of carnage and bloodshed, and said that his own blood had gone to the wars now, and felt that it would add a mighty interest in life to know that a Trenchard was aboard His Majesty's Ship *Sea Swallow*, helping to destroy the kingdom of France. He talked far into the night, and it weren't till his big voice had died down that Hester could sink into her own bitter thoughts and shed a few natural tears. But sleep she couldn't, and a longing took her afore dawn to creep up to Noah's dormer attic and touch with her lips the pillow where his sandy head did ought to be lying.

She weren't afraid for her husband, for when he slept he slept; and when he slept he snored. He was making a steady roar like a grampus now, and had been for two hours, before she slipped from his side and went to her son's room. And what she done there, and what she felt, and what she prayed, be hid with her and her Maker. But when the grey light of morning just began to trickle through night, she crept down again, a broken woman, and, crying to her heart's heart for some sort of consolation, went to her daughter's

room, doubting not that she'd find Joyce awake too. She hesitated a moment, for she knew her maid felt this awful blow only less than herself. But great suffering makes us selfish sometimes, and she hungered for a word and the touch of her daughter's hand.

So she went into the girl's little room at the far end of the house. 'Twas a chamber that looked over a little garden, where there was a chair under a willow tree, and a wall beneath which the river flowed. Steps fell to the water, and at low tide a strip of a beach was uncovered where lay boulders clad in brown sea-weed and the rotting bones of an old fishing boat.

Joyce's room was empty and the bed-clothes flung on the ground.

Hester stared and rubbed her eyes and drew the blind, to let in the first of the light; but it showed her nothing, and, much wondering, yet too weary to puzzle about it, she crept back to her own bed and slept heavily until morning came and the master bade her waken.

She thought 'twas all a bad dream at first; but then the truth flowed over her waking mind like an icy river; and such was her grief over Noah that she clean forgot the matter of Joyce and didn't call it to memory till a good few days later.

For her daughter was lighting the fire as usual when she went down house; and when her mother thought about going in her room and finding it empty, she doubted not that she'd dreamed it and never gone to seek the girl at all.

Not for a good few days did the meaning of that incident return with dreadful force to complete the poor woman's desolation and add the last horror to her life.

II

Time winged and Reuben Trenchard found a new interest in the war. He went over to Dartmouth one day a fortnight after Noah's departure to see if he could pick up news of his son's ship; and, coming back by water in an open boat to Stoke Gabriel with other natives, the winter wind bit cold, and the man, much to his surprise, found himself taken ill next night with trouble in his breathing tubes. Of the *Sea Swallow* he'd heard nothing, and got no news but bad about the war, so when he woke and found himself sick, he felt angry and cussed the Powers of Evil and bade Hester stir herself and bring him some hot drink.

He was croaking like a frog, and she felt frightened and got into her clothes and ran to Joyce. And then it was that she remembered the last time she had sought the girl in the middle of the night two weeks before. Because once more her daughter's room was empty, and this time the bed had not been pressed.

The poor woman felt properly torn in half between her husband and her child; but she dursn't add another to Reuben's troubles for the minute, so hurried to her kitchen and lighted her fire and hotted up some herby tea always kept for any fret to the breathing parts. Of elder-flowers 'twas made and other wild simples, and Hester won some fame for it.

She took a jorum to Reuben, and the clock struck three while he drank it. It soothed him, and he soon felt a bit more comfortable and hoped the morn would find him better. Then he fancied a slice of bread and butter, for he'd took

no supper the night before; and, just as his wife was cutting it for him, she heard a footstep and listened and knew that Joyce had come in and locked the door and stole up to her chamber. But she stopped a moment outside the kitchen, for, of course, she'd seen the light; then she slipped on, and doubtless thought her mother hadn't heard her.

Full of wonder, Hester took his food to Reuben, who ate hearty, drank another half-pint of the herby tea, and then sank down to sleep. He was soon off; then his wife put out the light and went straight to her child.

Joyce had just got into bed, and the dawn was breaking, when her mother stood afore her.

"Where hast thou been?" she asked.

"Does father know?" was all the maiden answered.

The grey light made her look ghostly pale; her black hair was down, and her eyes, so large as a cat's, staring out of her head. She was properly tired and spoke like a sleep-walker.

"He do not know," answered Hester; "but I've got no secrets from your father, and I hope to God you've got no secrets from me. Speak and tell me what you've been doing. The master's ill, and I came to rouse you, and found your bed hadn't been slept in to-night. Nor is this the first time. The night that Noah was pressed, in my great agony I came in to you for comfort, but you wasn't there. I thought 'twas a dream next morning and said nought. Now I know it happened. So you'd best to speak and tell the truth afore your Maker."

"Keep it from father, for the love of God," said Joyce. "If he knew—but I can't talk now,

mother—my eyes are shutting and I'm cruel tired. I'll tell you all to-morrow. But know this. I swear I've been doing no evil."

"You needn't pretend that, or fox yourself to think so," answered Hester. "Evil you have been doing to your parents, and their good name and honour. If the night-watchman—to name no other—had seen you sneaking into your house in the dimpsy light, wouldn't that have been evil?"

"I can't talk till morn. Trust me. There's nothing to be shamed on. But if you love me, and love your peace, don't tell father."

"I'll make no such promise," answered the elder. "You'll break the little heart that Noah have left me, I reckon. Evil—evil you've done, or you wouldn't fear your father. And to-morrow——"

She stopped, for Joyce had fallen asleep under her eyes. She breathed heavily, and seemed to be haggard and worn out in body and mind.

Nor could Hester hear any more about it until the next day was far spent, for Mr. Trenchard woke with bronchitis presently, and the house was in a proper uproar, and the doctor had to be fetched to the man as soon as it could be done. You see Reuben was built of whalebone and steel. He boasted that he had never known a day's illness since the measles at ten years old, so he weren't used to the ills of the flesh, and he made a lot more fuss than there was any need to make. The doctor set his mind at rest and told him he weren't going to die, and promised him that if he did as he was bidden he'd soon have a good recovery. Then, while the good leech stood and said a word to Hester at the door, Joyce came in with parcels from the village, and

the doctor looked at her, and vowed she weren't up to the mark by any means.

"What have you been up to?" he asked. "There's dark rims round your fine eyes, young woman, and your cheek's got a shadow instead of a rose on it, and you look as though you wanted a drop of my physic so well as your father. You're white as a witch."

But she said she was all right, and doctor, as loved a joke, vowed she was in love; but little thought the words went like a knife to her mother's heart.

Then he went off on his pony, and the patient had to be tended, and a good few things looked after before there was a chance for Hester to hear her daughter.

And when the time came she got mighty little, for Joyce had evidently thought the matter out and decided to say nothing at all. In truth, she knew her mother, and very well understood what she told Hester would get to her father inside four-and-twenty hours.

"You must trust me," she said. "I'm called to do a great thing, mother, and if you knew what it was you couldn't blame me; but you'd better not know, because, as you say, you've got no secrets from father and don't want none. A time is coming when you will know—maybe in a few weeks. Then I'll tell you everything, and you can tell father; but I won't tell you now; I'll only ask you to trust me. I've been a good daughter to you, and I'm hopeful always to be so. But nought's gained by saying anything now. And I can't do it."

Her mother begged her to speak, and clutched hold of her hand, and made Joyce wince with pain.

Then the mother looked at her daughter's hand, and found it all blistered, as though it had been burned across and across. T'other was the same, and Hester changed from the great matter to this little one and asked what the girl had done to herself.

"Nothing—nothing," she said. "For God's sake, let me be. I've got plenty on my mind too, and if you're going to make it worse than 'tis, and come between me and what I'm drove to do, I'll have to run away from you, mother. And if you drive me away, you'll be doing a far more dreadful thing than you know. For pity's sake, believe me, and don't spy no more on me, and let me tell you what there is to tell when I can do it presently."

Cold comfort, no doubt, and first Hester was angered and stormed; and then she was frightened and wept; but nothing changed Joyce; she only begged and prayed to be left alone to work out her own destiny in her own way.

And her mother left her chilled to the heart with fear and dread. She wasn't a strong-minded woman and never had kept a secret in her life, yet, alarmed by the frantic entreaties of her girl, she shut down on this mystery as best she could. But it worked in her and fretted a mind that was only just getting over the loss of Noah. Two nights running she crept to her girl's room and listened to her breathing and thanked God; but the third night her daughter was away again, and the woman soon felt she'd go mad if she hadn't no one to confide in. A very dreadful tragical fear was got in her. She travelled every road her wits could take her, and thought of a secret lover as the most likely thing.

Because the girl was made to love, but none dare court her in the open for fear of Reuben. Then she set that idea aside, and fastened on the terrible idea that the girl was a witch and her soul lost for all eternity. That notion burned into Hester like a flame, and at last, as he mended himself, Reuben began to see there was something very wrong with his wife, and turned his attention to her.

At first he thought it must be their boy, and strove to shame her for a coward; but then she said it weren't Noah, and swore there was nought the matter with her at all. So he knew she had lied, and set about her in earnest, and gave her no peace, until at last, after Joyce had been gone again until morning twice, the poor soul's nerve broke down, and she let it out that she feared their daughter was a fly-by-night, and had dark secrets hidden from all human ears.

She prayed Reuben to go tenderly, and hoped that if first he saw parson a way might yet be found to save her soul alive; but the man took a hugeous oath that if this was true his daughter's soul was already lost.

"Leave the rest to me and hope nothing," he said. "'Tis either a human man have got her or else the witches, but the devil in either case. She's lost to us. There's only my duty left to do, and with God's help I'll do it."

She asked him what he reckoned his duty was, and he told her to shut her mouth and say no more till he was well again and in a case to carry through.

"What it is I don't know yet," he told his wife, "but I shall know inside a week; and then I shall obey what the Lord puts into my heart to do.

First, I must be satisfied of the sin, and then I shall know the punishment."

So Hester saw her mistake, for her man never went back on his word, and she very well knew his opinion on the subject of them who were thought to traffic with the Children of the Air.

Trenchard was hard of hearing, but he could see as well as any man, so he made Hester keep watch on her daughter, and the very next night, from her spying place behind a great oak chest on the landing of the house, she heard her child move, and returned white to the lips to say that Joyce was stirring. With that Reuben rose up and went below, let himself out of the house by the back door, and then hid, where he could see the front door and mark what might hap. 'Twas a moony night as clear as day, and he weren't called to wait long, for the girl appeared ten minutes later. She was carrying something, and in the moonlight he saw the cat—a big black un—come up to her, so pleased as could be, with his tail in the air. Then they went off together into the garden, and Reuben gave 'em two minutes' start and then followed. But seemingly he weren't quick enough, for when he crept round the corner of the house, Joyce was gone. The sky was full of stars, and the river shone like silver and stole away to the sea between the wooded banks that towered up black as ink beside it; but nothing moved, and only a bat flickered overhead, hunting chafers round a fir tree. The girl was clean gone, and, though 'tis possible he might have heard the sound of her if his ears had been quick enough, the sight of her was hidden from him, and neither on earth nor in the air did she appear to be.

"My God!" he said, "she's flown and be half-way to the Witches' Ring by now, no doubt!"

He strained his eyes aloft in the direction of Fire Beacon Hill, far away to the south-west; but nothing met his stare save the round moon. Then he went in the house and poked about and looked for the birch besom. But it weren't there.

That finished him, you may say, and he called upon Hester, and bade her fall on her knees and pray the forgiveness of God for bearing a witch.

"'Tis all over, wife," he said, "and the creature must die. Many have called her a changeling, for that she was so different from my family and yours; and we can only hope it were so, and that she's no child of my loins. But mine or not, my duty's clear to me. We can't save her soul; for that be bartered to the devil in exchange for her fearful powers; but we ain't going to lose ours. This house don't harbour a handmaid of Satan—not if I know it—and, since God have said that no man shall suffer a witch to live, she must surely die."

"You can't kill 'em," moaned Hester.

"Yes, you can, if you know how. To man I'm not called to answer before this dreadful task, but only to God; and from this hour until the time when the deed is done I'm in my Maker's hands and the weapon of His will."

They prayed long hours until the morn was down; then Hester went to her bed and he followed, troubling not when his child might return, if ever she did so. But in his heart was the steadfast purpose to cut her thread so quickly as it might be done; while her mother had already planned to save Joyce in secret and at any cost

to herself. She was ready and willing to die for her if need be.

Nothing happened immediately, and then, before Reuben Trenchard had done the awful thing he was now bent upon for high religion's sake, that fell out to distract his mind from his daughter in the shape of news about his son. And the news was terrible black.

There sailed into Dartmouth a sloop from Guernsey, as had run across in the wake of a battered English frigate; and she carried tidings of the *Sea Swallow*. But they were evil, for the ship had been cornered by three Frenchmen all bigger than herself, and, after sinking one and fighting a running fight with t'others at long bowls, she'd blown up and gone down with her colours flying. It seemed that the bigger vessels carried heavier metal, and, though she had the pace of them, that was lost to her, for her foremast was brought down early in the fight, and after that 'twas only a question of time till they sank her. And when they struck her magazine 'twas all over. Of her company but two survived, and they were picked up two days later at their last gasp on a floating spar. The Guernsey sloop had fetched 'em in; but they were Plymouth men, and so it followed that all the poor fellows pressed from Dittisham and Stoke Gabriel and Duncannon had given their lives for their country.

There was weeping and wailing then, and the robbed homes cursed the war, and mothers and sweethearts tore their hair. But the men faced it better, and Trenchard set 'em a good example, for he said the memory of a hero son was so precious as the flesh-and-blood boy himself, and

he heartened the grief of his wife, and made her come to church to hear a very brave funeral sermon preached by parson in honour of the fallen.

"Benjamin Trivett, and Saul and Daniel Life, and Noah Trenchard, have given their lives for one and all of us," said his reverence, "and we shall not mourn them, but rather rejoice in their glorious sacrifice, for greater love hath no man than this. Their names henceforth will be precious jewels to their families, and heir-looms above price for their native village. For their God and the powers of virtue, for their country and their King, have they fallen, and I bid you lift up your hearts and make a merry noise, that these heroes, now crowned in glory, may know we cherish their valiant deeds and take heart from their sublime example."

He talked for an hour and a half in this noble manner, and all the time, dear man, the tears fell down his old face; and while he heartened most of the people and rang out many a loud 'Amen' from Trenchard, where he sat with other mourners in the funeral pew, yet some among the people weren't so much moved as they did ought to have been; and some even whispered after that, seeing the poor boys had all been pressed and made to fight against the bent of their own minds, you couldn't call 'em so much heroes as martyrs.

But since that view seemed to question the courage of the dead, it weren't popular, and got them that took it into trouble—as reason so often will make trouble when the mind of man ain't tuned to bear it. For all bosoms were warm just then, and there was a great wave of feeling in the air, and at such times 'tis better to give

rein to the bowels of compassion and keep the head shut until the general fervour cools a bit.

Joyce went to church along with her parents, and Reuben told her mother after that he fully expected to see some fearful thing fall out; but nought happened to her, and he doubted not that her master, the Fiend, was strong enough even to save her from Heaven's anger in the House of God.

And when the days passed and her doom drew near, Hester made a last frantic prayer to her husband to spare the girl, or at least to go to parson with the story and leave it to the holy man to decide what should be done. But that Trenchard would not do.

"Publish my everlasting disgrace I don't," he said. "'Tis bad enough to know what we know; but none else, save our Maker, ever shall. The way is clear afore me now, and I know what is going to happen. If child she is of ours, then we lose both our children by the will of God; but we don't lose our honour, nor yet our hope of Heaven."

"'Tis murder if you do it," she said with shaking lips; but he answered that 'twas no murder more than the slaying of a weasel, or hawk, or other evil creature.

"What God wills is higher than murder, and alike far above our good or evil doing," he told her; "and in these cases it is His purpose and plan that the instrument suffers not. For when a witch dies 'tis very different from an honest woman's end. You'll see what betides and need fear nought for the future—either for my fame or your own. The Lord have ordained the way to send a witch out of life, and only under His

guiding Hand can it be done; and the way I very well know, for in my youth I worked with a man whose brother did even as I be going to do; and it was counted to him for righteousness."

So he left her dazed and dumb.

Joyce strove to comfort her mother for Noah's end, but she shed few tears herself; and now she went in a sort of dream, changed even to the eye, for when she put on her black for her brother she seemed a shadow of her old self, and her face was drawn and anxious.

Then Trenchard fixed the day of the girl's death and told her mother.

"It must fall in the reign of the Easter moon," he said, "and the first time she leaves the house after the day the Lord rose from the grave, upon her returning she will die."

It wanted but three days to Good Friday when he said this thing, and Hester, now brought to a pitch beyond human power to endure, told the girl what was to happen and the awful fate in store for her.

III

When first Joyce heard it she turned bitterly upon her mother, and spoke wild words, and cried out she had wrecked her own hopes of happiness for ever.

"I prayed you not to tell him, for well I knew that evil would fall out if you did," she declared. "I told you on my oath I was doing no harm and knew no more about the ways of witches than you do; and now you've ruined all and brought me face to face with death, and put murder into my father's heart. But well I knew you'd told

him, for he's changed to me ever since you did, and he crosses his fingers when he speaks to me. 'Tis little enough odds if I die, but——"

"Speak to him—speak to him," implored Hester. "Tell him the truth, however terrible it is, for only that will turn him."

"I can't, and never shall," she answered. "I can die; but the truth must be for ever hidden from him. 'Tis worse than what he thinks."

"Worse!" cried the poor mother.

"In his sight, no doubt. For you, mother—no, you shan't hear it neither yet, for I can't trust you to keep it from him."

"I don't want to hear it," she answered. "I'll hear nought I can't tell him. I only pray you to be gone and return no more if you want to live. Shall I see your father's hand dyed in your blood, and him marked for the gallows?"

"I'll go, then," answered the girl. "I'll go to Mark Trenchard, my cousin, on Dartymoor. And when it can be done, you'll hear tell of me. But if you don't want my father to hunt me down and take my life, hide it from him. And when I'm gone, I'll get the truth to you somehow. For know it you must, mother."

'Twas a terrible queer conversation without a doubt, and the elder woman, very near out of her mind by now, had her child's promise to go; and that was all she cared about. Joyce heard that her father was going to kill her when the Easter moon reigned, so she said that next time she went from home after Easter her mother could be at peace, for she'd return no more.

She laughed bitterly too, for she could see her mother believed Reuben was right about her.

"There's one thing I'm fearing you'll miss

when I be gone for good," she said. "You'll have to buy a new birch besom, mother; and, if black puss don't come back some morning, you'll know he's thrown in his lot along with me."

But her mother was past jokes of that sort. Already she feared the future, and steeled her heart to play a part and hide from the old man that she had forestalled him for the sake of her daughter's life.

She found him one day engaged at the fire, and asked him what he was doing. Then he told her what to expect.

"I'm melting down a crown piece," he said, "and little did I ever think to put a bit of honest money to such a dark purpose; but so it is. A witch only dies of a silver bullet, and you needn't be fearing any trouble afterwards, because when the silver touches her heart she's sped, and she vanishes away like a puff of smoke. Not a trace will she leave, for there's no resurrection for a witch: she goes body and bones to the Devil the instant moment she dies, and them that understand the matter know how it is."

He poured his silver in a mould and made a bullet; then he fetched a great horse-pistol and loaded it, dropping in the bullet on a heavy charge of gunpowder. Hester creamed all over for dread, you may be sure; but she said nothing; and then she kept her nightly vigils again, for, though she knew the hour that Joyce was going off, she had to pretend she did not. As for her thoughts through those last days, she never could put them into words, for there's no doubt she was much inclined to believe her husband against her child; for what possible thing could be so secret that the girl must keep it hid, and

run from home rather than tell it? There was no such secret but the secret of some awful crime, and no worse crime in that house than witchcraft.

But even though the girl might be a witch, a mother's a mother, and the thought of her fate was a long sight too much for the poor woman. She steadfastly believed that the worst human creature might mend and win to Heaven through repentance; and so 'twas her hope, if Joyce went away and kept away for a bit, her soul might yet be saved alive.

Then the night came—the Tuesday after Easter it was—and the girl went off not to return, as her mother hoped. And when she was reported to be gone, Reuben rose and rayed himself, and prayed a good deep prayer; then he looked to the priming of his pistol and, at morning light, went out to meet his daughter and slay her as soon as she flew down and set foot on the earth. For stoutly he believed she'd come back from her unholy business on a broomstick.

Hester pretended as she couldn't dare to come out and see the end; but he bade her do so.

"She ain't no child of yours; 'tis vain and wicked to feel to her as a mother," he said. "The wretch have lived upon us as the cuckoo's young lives on other fowls of the air. But's our misfortune, not our fault, and 'tis right that we who have suffered most through her should be appointed to rid the earth of the pest."

He tramped in his garden and the dawn grew red, and Hester prayed him to come in and eat his breakfast.

"Perhaps she can read our thoughts and knew

what were yours," she said; "or maybe them she trusts in knew her danger and warned her against coming back to you. For there's nought hidden from the Powers of the Pit."

But he wouldn't have that.

"Be Satan craftier than the Almighty?" he asked; and in another moment it certainly looked as if he was not, for, to her mother's undying horror, Joyce herself appeared. She didn't descend from the air, but seemed to rise out of the earth. One minute she weren't there; the next she was; and, though it looked like magic, there was nothing magical to it, because she came to the river steps at the bottom of the garden and then hurried across the greensward to her parents.

She was beyond fear, and seemed quite out of her mind over some private misfortune. Her face was white and haggard, and her hair had fallen down her back. Fearful despair and misery stared out of her great black eyes, and one hand hung by her side while t'other was pressed to her bosom. It looked as though she'd forgot about her mother's warning, or the dreadful purpose of her father to put her away at sight, for she came straight towards them from the river, and only when Reuben in a loud voice cried out upon her did she stand still and appear to remember what she was doing. And in truth she had clean forgot her mother's warning, for that had happened to the unfortunate girl which drove all else out of her mind—even such a dreadful thing as the threat of cruel death at her father's hands.

Now she remembered, however, at his voice, yet seemed to care nothing and fear nothing.

"In the name of God, stand, witch!" cried Reuben. "All's known, you limb of Satan, and your thread's cut this instant moment!"

It was touch and go, and Hester screamed and threw her apron over her head; but Joyce did the only thing to save herself, for she fixed her eyes without flinching on her father and came to him, and spoke as he lifted his pistol and aimed at her breast.

"Kill me if you think that, father; but listen first. I don't want to live, though I stand here before God as innocent of witchcraft as my mother. If you'll hear all that's happened, I'll speak; if you won't hear, then kill me—'tis for your sake, not mine, I pray you hear, for I don't want to live no more after to-day."

He was in two minds even then to pull trigger, but the Lord held his hand. He hesitated a second, and Hester spoke.

"Hear her, master—for God's love, hear her! Look at her—she ban't lying. She's near daft."

Reuben regarded Joyce with little love; but he could not fail to see she did not fear him.

"Go on your knees," he said, "and call on the Saviour of the world to strike you dead if you be what I think you be."

"For mother's sake I will," she answered, without fear. "You hate me, father, and maybe you'll hate me no less when you know the truth; but the truth it is, and I've done nought that calls for killing even in your judgment."

Then she went on her knees and challenged Heaven to destroy her if she had done evil; and when nought happened her father bade her come in the house and speak, and her mother, bubbling over with secret thanks to God, and very near

light-headed about it, as well she might be, set about getting food for the exhausted girl.

She told her tale wearily enough; but before she'd got half way through it, Reuben Trenchard was regretting his crown piece and a good many other things also. Even in her grief and pain, the fine girl had a thought for her mother's nerves and her father's feelings.

"I hope and pray brother Noah lives," she began. "At any rate, he didn't lose his life in the *Sea Swallow*. I've done all a sister could do, and very near killed myself doing it; but what the end will be I don't know."

"You'd best to begin at the beginning," said her father sternly, for he was still far from trusting her. "And if your brother ban't in a hero's grave, where is he?"

"I could have told you two days agone," she answered. "Now I can't. I'll begin at the beginning as you bid me, and the beginning was the night they pressed him. The battle-ship put out after midnight, and Noah and the rest of the new men were herded on a lower deck with none to mind 'em for the minute. And it comed over him and Widow Trivett's son to make a dash for it. They waited till the vessel was just between the harbour heads, and not a hundred yards from Kingswear Castle; then they took off their boots and went out through a port-hole. But they was heard, and a boat dropped in no time, and a flare blazed up aboard the ship. It showed 'em swimming in the water, and as luck had it they rowed for Benny Trivett, and catched him not ten yards from shore; but, by the time they rowed for Noah, he'd got in, and with fifty yards' start up through Kingswear woods.

which he knew and they did not, he slipped 'em."

"'Tis death to desert," said Reuben.

"So he said when he came home," answered Joyce. "He crawled back by two in the morning with his feet raw and his body spent. He flung stones at my window and waked me, and I went down and heard his tale. Then I brought him dry clothes, for he was dripping and shivering, and gave him food, and heard what he meant to do about it.

"He'd fixed with himself to lie hid in reach of me, so as I could keep him alive a few days; and he hoped a week hence to get off into Dartymoor, and find work, and keep out of man's sight till the war was over. He'd fixed on the ruined boat-house up Bow Creek a mile from here, and he knew in that lonely spot no man would find him, and he could bide there safe enough for a few days till he was ready to track off.

"I rowed him there in Fisherman Mudge's boat, and left him with a loaf and a blanket off my bed; and 'twas morning light before I got back and made the boat fast and crept into the house. And the next night I went again and was very near drowned, for I got into the mud and couldn't get off till I'd gone over the side waist deep. But I forgot my trouble when I reached the old boat-house under the oak trees in the creek, for there was Noah terrible ill and like to die. I prayed him to come back with me and go to doctor and leave himself in his hands; but he said that was certain death, for if doctor cured him he'd only have to give him up to be shot, and Noah reckoned he'd sooner die a natural death if it had to be. I rowed back then and

took a bottle of brandy from the cellar, and all I could lay my hands upon that was any use, and then I rowed to him again, and the brandy done him good. I got hot water in a tin pan with candles under it, and worked at him all I knew how, and then he bade me go afore the day broke, and I did so—none too soon, for hardly was Mudge's boat in its place and me coming up our steps from the beach when the fisherman himself went down the alley.

"Three nights running I went and cheered Noah, and took him all I dared, and never knew each time I left him if I'd find him alive when I came back. Then, thank God, my trouble was paid, and he turned the corner and promised he'd live. But he was a proper shadow now, and I took him milk and such-like.

"That went on for ten days, and then he picked up strength and began to hope. It all happened in the sail loft over the water, for, though the bottom part's a ruin, the loft over is very near weather-tight and sheltered by the trees from the rain and wind. And I swept it clean with the besom I fetched.

"You asked me after my hands, mother. They got like that rowing back and forward by night, for Mudge's boat is too heavy for a woman to pull, and up to yesterday I'd made twenty-two journeys with her, and never took no count of the tide neither, but only the time.

"And now all's lost, and all I've done be in vain by the look of it."

Joyce broke down here and sobbed bitterly. Her mother was on thorns to know the rest of the tale; but Reuben 'twas who spoke at this point. For his own son he cared little enough

now he knew the man weren't a hero; but it did come home to him pretty forcible the sort of daughter he'd got, and if she weren't a heroine 'twas hard to know what to call her.

"No call for you to take on," he said. "Of course you was wrong as wrong can be; but you done what you thought was right for a brother, and whatever happens I shan't blame you. Your heart was in the right place to shield your brother — not that any man can be shielded from his lawful fate, and if it have gone hard with Noah it was by the Lord's will."

"I don't know how it have gone with him," she answered; "I only know that he has gone, but not from any will to go. It was settled in his mind that next week would be the last, and after that he'd leave the boat-house for the Moor. He'd got up his strength and was strong on his feet and eager to be away.

"But when I reached the boat-house last night he weren't there, and I lighted a candle and saw that harm had befallen Noah. Who found out his hiding-place I don't know, but 'tis plain that enemies have tracked him down and catched him.

"The sail loft was in a fearful state, and you could see there'd been a struggle there, for boards had broken under the feet of fighting men, and there was a lot of blood on the floor. I fell sick and fainty when I saw it, and made sure I should find Noah's dead body somewhere near; and I stopped till peep of day and hunted round about, but could find nought but a knife. Then I went down the loft steps and looked below in the wood outside. The ground was trampled round the boat-house with the marks of many feet, so I

reckon they haven't killed him, but took him away. And that's the living truth, every word of it. I've fought for him—and God only knows how I fought; but 'tis all in vain, and if he ban't dead now, no doubt 'twill be the prison wall and a file of soldiers for the innocent wretch."

She ceased to talk, then felt a weight in her pocket, and drew out a weapon and flung it on the table.

For a minute or two neither of her parents spoke. Hester fell to tears and sobbed with her head on the table, and the old man heaved a big sigh or two with his mind on his son.

"Would to God," he said, "that he'd perished as a brave man and not left the bitter memory and everlasting disgrace of a coward upon his name. As for you, Joyce, I believe you. No female could invent no such tale as this, and whether you did right or wrong must be left to your own conscience. At least 'twas white wickedness, not black as I feared. You did your valiant best to save your cowardly brother, and I'm proud of you."

"Never call him a coward," she answered. "With all his faults he weren't that. If you'd seen him as I saw him, on the edge of death, calm and brave, and ready to go, you'd see, though he weren't built to fight the French, he had his proper nature, and would have done his duty in the world if his fate had fallen different."

But Reuben weren't listening. He'd picked up the knife and was fingering it and staring at it.

"Look you here," he said. "This ain't no English blade. I thought the shape of it was queer. 'Tis a fancy thing, with a jewel in the handle and a name let into the steel in gold.

No English name either. 'de Foix'—'Felix de Foix'—a French name. A French sailor's dirk, that's what that is!"

But Joyce explained how that might be.

"Something some English sailor got in the wars, you may be sure, and dropped when he was struggling with Noah. It only shows 'twas sailors who have hunted him down. To Dartmouth he was took, be sure, and I pray you'll go and make a fight for him, father. There's mercy in the land yet, and gentle hearts; and when all I've done be told, it might happen they'd spare him and give him another chance for my sake."

But Trenchard shook his head.

"The law's the law, and the law of the deserter from duty in war time all men know. I'll go to Dartmouth, and I'll see him, and help him to make his peace with his Maker, Joyce. They won't keep a father from his son at such a time; but he's beyond the power of man to save, and for my part, if I pray to them, 'twould be to use his life for England and not waste a volley on it. But 'tis beyond hope they'll grant even so much mercy."

Then silence fell among 'em, and the girl looked at the knife and moved her hand a little way towards it. For she felt her days were done and all lost. In her despair, and strung up to the point of madness as she was that minute, she'd as soon have turned the blade into her own heart as not; for the fierce pluck and dauntless courage that had carried her through the past weeks suffered a cruel strain at this moment, and their strength was more than great enough to end her own life.

But when the notes of their hearts were lowest, and as Reuben rose up and bade 'em list while he lifted a prayer to God, there came a sound from the river, and the master heard himself called from the water. They went out then and saw a Government pinnace with a lot of marines in her, and a few soldiers also; and among them sat Noah Trenchard.

IV

"They be coming to shoot him for a lesson in his native place," said Reuben; but Joyce had heard laughter in the boat, and she rushed down to the steps to see what it might mean. She knew if the soldiers were come to Stoke Gabriel to shoot Noah against the churchyard wall, they would not be laughing about it. Then the boat drove in, and there was Noah so free as air, and everybody ever so pleased with him. In fact, they treated him much more as if he was a hero than a deserter. His father knew not whether to bless or curse the young man, and his mother heard his voice in a dream, for her mind was a slow machine to move, and it took her many days to grasp the fact that Noah was alive and hearty, and not at the bottom of the sea.

He told them what had turned his sorrow into joy, and his bad fortune into good; and it seemed a story a man could hardly be asked to believe. Yet there was that at Dartmouth to prove the truth of all he said.

The marines and red-coats must needs come in and drink good fortune to Noah; and while they did so he told his amazing tale.

"It fell out the night before last," said Noah. "I'd gone off roaming up so far as Tuckenhay in the moonlight, and was away from the boat-house a matter of four or five hours. Then, returning through the woods, I saw a light and came forward quickly enough, reckoning it was Joyce, though I did not expect her till the following night. But as I got nearer, to my surprise I heard people talking, and I stopped and went softly, for it looked as though I'd been found. I listened outside for a bit and heard two voices; then I got to a crack under the roof and took a squint. There were two men huddled close at the far end of the sail loft, and they were talking French. One was big, a black-bearded fellow, and the other small with a face like a turnspit dog. A candle burnt beside them, and the little man flung his arms when he talked and made black shadows on the walls. I couldn't understand them, or guess how they'd got there; but one thing seemed clear indeed, and that was they were our enemies and could be up to no sort of good. I felt they must be spies, that had come through from France to Dartmouth somehow, and the question for me was whether I could take the pair single-handed, or if I should go and seek help at Tuckenhay against 'em.

"I dare say if I'd been a free man myself, and not in danger of the law, I wouldn't have took the risk, father. More likely I'd have slipped off and got a dozen stout chaps together and surrounded the foreign dogs in the King's name; but being just so much an outlaw as them, and just so like to die if I was caught, I hesitated a bit what to be at. They'd evidently been put up to the old boat-house by somebody at Dart-

mouth; and so I guessed I was on the edge of a plot, and that if I came out of it with credit it might be the saving of me myself. So I ordained to tackle them—as much for my salvation as their destruction.

"It was one desperate man against two, of course; but a fairer struggle than you might think. I knew the ground, and it was in my power to surprise them. My idea was to get in with a rush on the big black chap first and knock him out once for all, if I didn't actually kill him. At any rate, I meant to hit him so hard that he'd stir no more till I'd settled with the little man. The danger was small-arms; but I had to chance that.

"They evidently felt no fear, nor was there need to, for in the ordinary way six months might have passed before any human soul looked into the ruin. I couldn't wait. I felt I had to strike right away and win, or lose; so I took a heavy stake—the only weapon I had—crept up the stairs into the loft, reached the top and rushed upon 'em. They had their backs to me now and were eating a bit of food; and they were so astonished at an enemy bursting upon 'em in this fashion that the battle was over almost before it was begun. I brought my great stake down fair and true on the black-bearded man's head, and it settled him for good. He rolled over like a bullock pole-axed, and knowing I should not be able to use the bludgeon again, or get in another stroke with such a weighty weapon, I dropped it, and was just in time to avoid a rush from the little man. I slipped him, and then got between him and his friend and tried to corner him. And for a corner he went, and, guessing what was there, I got between. He spoke then, and

showered out words, forgetting that I could not understand him. Then suddenly, drawing a knife from his belt, he leapt at me like a tiger, though old to be so spry. I guarded with my right arm, and only got a scratch, while with my left fist I hit him square on the throat and dropped him. The knife flew out of his hand, and he was powerless long enough for me to do the trick and get what he had wanted to get. For in the corner were their weapons. My luck held to the end, and I came out of it with no more than a wounded shoulder. When de Foix got his legs once more I had a pistol in each hand and two more in my pockets, so of course the game was mine. When blackbeard came to, which happily he did, he could do nothing; and he couldn't have done anything if he'd been Goliath of Gath, for he'd bled like a pig from his head.

"I fastened them together wrist and ankle, and marched them to Tuckenhay through the woods. There I roused the village, and didn't uncock the pistols till they were trussed up like a brace of chickens ready for roasting.

"It was morn by now, and, knowing not what friends they might have at Dartmouth, we ordained to wait till dark before we took 'em there, and after a long day in Miller Veale's barn, well guarded every hour, we set out for town at midnight and got 'em over without loss in the miller's big van.

"And it's come out that these men sailed in the sloop from Guernsey that arrived a fortnight ago. They be cunning spies, full of a plot to help the French to take Dartmouth. And a lot of secret friends they had in Dartmouth; but

they be smoked to a man now, and all by the heels, French spies and English traitors alike."

That was Noah's tale, and the marines cheered him and called on Reuben to give 'em all another drink when he came to the end of it. Noah was a proper hero in their sight, and, considering his valiant deed, nobody seemed to remember about the fact that he'd deserted from the Navy; but when the boat was gone back to Dartmouth, Reuben set on to Noah concerning his own terrible position and heard some surprising facts; and Joyce heard 'em also, and pointed out how their history might all have fallen out differently if they'd known these things sooner.

"I was called before the Justices at Dartmouth," said Noah, "and I confessed that I was the man who escaped from the *Sea Swallow* on the night she came in to press men. But the Justices didn't take it serious against me by any means, and General Forde said it ain't held a capital crime in Law for a pressed man to escape out of a ship if he's witty enough to do it. And he also said that it was clearly not meant that I should go to sea, because the Almighty had planned for me to bide at home and catch these rascals in His good time. In fact I'm very well thought of at Dartmouth, so I hope you'll see it in the same light, father."

Of course, Reuben couldn't withhold forgiveness, because the old man's religion showed him clear enough that Noah had been a tool in higher Hands and the instrument of England's watchful God against the foreign foe.

"You're pardoned, as I hope to be," said the young man's parent. "'Tis all clear as truth now, and you can fit it together like a puzzle; for if

you hadn't been pressed you wouldn't have run away; and if you hadn't run away you wouldn't have hid up Bow Creek, and you wouldn't have catched these rogues and very like saved England from destruction."

"And if Joyce hadn't worked for me, same as the ravens worked for Elijah, I'd never have lived to do it," added Noah.

"And you'd never have thought I was a wicked witch, father," said the girl herself.

"You're the wonderful thing," declared Reuben. "You're a long ways greater heroine than Noah is hero in my opinion, and I shall take good care your part be echoed for the nation to hear it. Heaven have been pleased to give me two very remarkable offspring, and the fame of you both shall be blazed abroad."

"But there's no need for anybody to hear about your silver bullet outside the family, master," pleaded Hester, and Reuben quite agreed to that. Indeed he drew the charge before their eyes and gave the bullet to Joyce.

"Keep it as long as you live," he said, without a thought of shame, "and hand it down to your children as an heirloom, to prove the sort of man their grandfather was. And when you tell the tale, show your little ones how the Lord blessed us and was good to us and parted the clouds over our heads when they rolled darkest. 'Twill make them God-fearing without a doubt."

XVI

ANOTHER LITTLE HEATH-HOUND

WHO B'LIEVE in the heath-hounds now? Who hold wi' me that they hunt by day an' night, through winter an' summer? Yet my own husband 'twas as not only heard but seen wi' his eyes. An' he haven't been dead above twenty year.

Night-foundered the man was, up Rayborrow Pool way under Cosdon Beacon, after a light snow, as comed sudden an' mazed him, as it will even the oldest moormen, by changing of landmarks with its magic. Just a faint far-off tinkle o' sound first he heard, no sharper'n the wind in the dead heath; then it swelled an' gathered like to ringing of bells; an' then growed louder an' sweeter, an' rose into the full bay of little fairy hounds 'pon a scent. Like harp moosic, my dear man said—moosic played 'midst the fleece o' the high clouds. Butivul to hear was the li'l hounds givin' tongue; an', knowin' well where he stood, my man felt a prayer to God bubblin' up in his heart. An' maybe 'twas well he felt it, for the thing them heath-hounds hunt swept past him like a breath from a furnace. Red-hot eyes to un, an' a sound same as a bellows in his throat, an' a ribbon of hell-fire for a tongue. But us may

not speak of that, an' my husband wouldn't tell even me the shape of it, though I worrited him to do so. An' after comed the li'l dogs — scores 'pon scores, doin' the will of their Maker an' workin' out their own salvation by harryin' an' huntin' the Evil One over Dartymoor till Eternity. Catch him they can't, seemin'ly; but maybe they keep him out of mischief here an' there, an' head un off now an' again when he makes for the villages. My man see'd 'em that night—a great pack, wi' their noses to the brimstone scent o' the Dowl. Then, like moonbeams, all the hounds was gone, an' only the snow rolled out over hills an' vales, an' the cry of 'em died into a lonely echo out 'pon the night among the tors, like the murmur of waters far off. He went, then, to see the sign of 'em, but not a paw-mark could he find, for the snow was so soft an' suent as when it falled out the sky. An' my Jim died four year later—though no more'n sixty-nine at the time he see'd 'em; for 'tis whispered as no man lives very long arter he's met the heath-hounds.

Yet what they small busy dogs be, who truly knows? They'm forgot, like many another dark way of God wi' his spirits; they'm clean forgot out of mind, an' only their Maker, an' a few other old wise folks—same as me—believes in these things, an' knows 'bout 'em, an' keeps 'em hid in our hearts.

There's a story to it, an' if I've beginned backsy first you must let a old woman tell her tale how she will.

'Twas my sister—Mary Applebird—so you'll judge none could know more of the innermost truth than what I do. Me an' her was the darters

of Gregory Applebird, who keeped the Green Man Inn to Little Silver. My younger brother keeps it now, though not the man his faither was by a long flight, I assure 'e.

As to the place, 'tis just same as it was—a grey stone house wi' the granite white-washed over an' the slate roof tar-pitched. An' above the door there stands a iron to stick a oil lamp in winter nights, an' higher still was a signboard, whose creakin' an' groanin' in the windy weather I'll never forget. That have gone long years now, but 'twas a fine an' bold sign — a brave chap in a green coat wi' a red face an' a gun 'pon his shoulder; an' Charlie Strickland 'twas as painted it.

You see, faither couldn't abide as any man should best him in his own way of life, an' when Benjamin Biddlecombe, who kept the Red Heifer to Moreton, had a chap from Newton to paint a huge signboard for him, nothin' would please my faither but to have the like, or better. An' Strickland, bein' a Chaggyford man, faither ordained, in a bad hour, as he should do the job, an' agreed wi' him for a picksher painted on wood—ten shillings the price, if all folks could see what 'twas meant for, an' Charlie to find his own paint.

A chap of many parts, Strickland was—most wonnerful man ever turned out of Chaggyford, by all accounts, an' amazin' high conceit of hisself too. A fellow wi' twenty different ways of turnin' a penny. The man kept bees; he was handy at stone-cutting also, an' could chip a angel or a devil for a church rainspout, or do a grave-stone wi' the best; he was a sign-writer an' a fisherman also. In fact, he killed more trout in

season an' sold 'em for sixpence a pound than you'd credit. A terrible clever shotsman wi' a rifle he were, an' one as feared nought on four legs. Farmers an' squires would always get him to break in their colts, for 'twas what he did cleverest of all; an' if he'd been a little chap 'stead of a tidy big one, he'd 'a' gone for a horse-jockey, an' very likely got into a lord's stables. As it was, he rode out steeplechasin', an' was accounted a rare man for a horse. Yet, if you'll believe it, his faither wern't no account at all—only good to cut fuzz an' sweep muck; which he done for fifty year, then died wi'out a friend or enemy in the world.

But young Strickland, for all his business an' bustle an' bounce, an' generous opinion of his own parts, had more friends than counsellors. Old men shook their heads against him as a chap too dazzlin' in his qualities, but the gals tossed their curls for him, because he was always set that way, an' he loved their praise, an' was one of the dashin' knock-me-down sort as takes women by storm. A brown head of hair the man had, an' bold eyes, an' a great power of patience where he took a fancy.

An' Mary Applebird—poor fool—though she knowed what sort of character the chap carried, took an' loved him, an' he was heart and soul for her. Time showed as she'd really got to the core of the man, an' might have been the very woman to steady his spirit; but faither was against him, though Polly's tears might have softened a stone. Raven dark my sister was—eighteen year old then—wi' a li'l mouth so red as a quarrender apple, an' always a thought open, so's you could see her purty teeth shining. Eyes she had

betwixt brown an' gold; an' she was a bowerly wench, simple an' true, as believed in the man, an' trusted him same as you trust the sun to light to-morrow.

The picksher was painted in a outhouse behind the inn, an' there, many an' many a long hour, Charlie dawdled over his work, while Polly wasted her time an' watched him unbeknownst to faither. That crafty the young man was that he took thrice so long as need be over his job, an' so there weren't no profit in the signboard to him.

An' my sister, just because faither was pleased wi' the work, thought as he'd take kind to the painter too. But my faither reckoned Strickland no match for any darter of his. Applebirds were always bettermost among the village folk of Little Silver, while Stricklands were nought afore this dashin' chap comed; so when Charlie tried for our Mary he got a very short answer.

"You've done your job all right," faither said, "an' if you've only used stuff as'll stick to the wood come bad weather, I'll say you're a sound workman. But Polly's a differ'nt matter. No call to waste words or give reasons. She ban't for you, an' there's an end of it."

Easy to talk! The young chap flared up like a bonfire, an' wanted to know what any man had against him; but faither wouldn't listen to no argeyments at all, an' the upshot was that off Strickland went, an' him an' Mary kept company in secret for a matter of three months after.

Then the man dropped in to see my faither again—one evenin' arter closin' time. I mind it too well, for Polly told me as he was comin', an' prayed as I'd be there to see how it falled out. Well, he was in a very upsome vein then. He

talked big words, an' wouldn't take 'No' for an answer.

When faither was faced wi' things as vexed un sharp like that, the redness of his blood showed through his skin rose-bright, an' his strong hands hit at the thing nearest to him to hammer home his words. An' now he hit an' hit a pewter pint-pot till the thing was scat so flat as if a waggon-wheel had gone over it.

"You damn, young, bee-keepin' toad of a boy —you dare!" rolled out faither. "You tadpole of a fellow, wi' your airs an' graces! What's the lads comin' to? Get out! Get out this instant moment, or worse may happen to 'e, fat as I be! Threaten me, would 'e? There! Get you gone out o' my sight, you box o' devil's tricks. If I come around the bar, gormed if I won't shake the life out of 'e! An' you speak to my maid again an' I'll set p'liceman upon 'e."

The young man looked ugly, an' I almost feared as there'd have been a scuffle. But he only spoke an' said as he'd make faither smart yet.

"You'll cuss yourself for this so well as me, Mister Applebird," he said. "I've offered you a square, honest offer to take your darter, as I loves very well, an' her loves me. But now, God's my judge, marry Mary I won't, not until you goes on your knees to me an' begs my pardon."

Then he went off, an' faither roared out like a bull till the glasses ringed again. Cold an' bitter the chap's voice was, an' the words of him had a ugly sound to my ear an' made me creep, though I didn't guess all they meant. An', as for faither, he was makin' noise enough hisself for a rampin' lion, an' didn't give no heed to what the other was sayin'.

He knowed soon enough, though; an' when I went up to the chamber where me an' Mary slept, an' I told her how contrary things had falled out below, she fainted off like a log, an' I beginned to fear for her.

Awful weeks they was, for us hadn't no mother livin'. An' then it comed out, an', as ill luck would have it, the very day afore faither got to know there was a li'l wan comin', poor Mary quarrelled wi' her lover, an' he said he was weary of such a dog's life, an' meant to quit it an' go where the likes of him was wanted.

An' by the time faither'd fought wi' his pride an' swallowed enough to send a messenger for Strickland, the man was gone for a horse-sojer. He had a friend to some big town, an' there was a call for sojers an' a chance of fightin', so Charlie Strickland went an' left my sister wi' a solemn promise as he'd come back if he lived so to do. Next thing we heard from Chaggyford was that his regiment was off to help the French against the Roosians somewheers t'other end of the airth; an' more we never knowed or heard for two year or thereabouts. But much had happened in Little Silver afore he set foot in it again, though there's never no change to the eye here, unless you look over the churchyard wall.

Faither was hit very hard by it, an' from bein' a hale stout man, growed old-like an' beginned to drift down-hill. Mary bore herself brave enough, but my brothers turned against her. Yet she kept her heart up, an' it stood to her for strength that Strickland would surely come back sooner or late, if God spared him. You see, Nature had tickled the man into this selfish bit o' wickedness, an' it was cruel hard 'pon the gal.

Yet just so good work's turned out wrong side the blanket seemingly as holy matrimony can show, and when the baby did come 'twould have done ample credit to any marriage smiled on by the Lord's Self. A dear li'l dinky boy as ever you see'd or wanted to; an' the mother took heart of grace from him through just a few short weeks. But then trouble crowded us cruel close, an' the baby comed to sad grief from a neighbour's cheel, as was called in to be useful 'bout the place; an' doctor found the gal third day she was there an' packed her off, for he knowed she was only just better of the whoopin' cough. But the mischief had been done; the infant catched it an' fought away his short life 'pon my lap three weeks to a day arter he was born. So like his faither in his ways too! So overmastering! To see un clench his hands an' fight against death wi' all his tiny strength! An' the same time 'twas borne in upon me, in dreams like, as his faither was doin' the very same thing long ways off. When the li'l boy was numbered, an' doctor said us mustn't hope no more, I went for Parson Smedley to baptize un. By night it was—half after ten or so. But parson explained how the li'l boy was born out of wedlock—as if I didn't know it! He talked a great deal I couldn't understand, then said he'd look up somethin' in his books an' come around in the marnin'.

Boy died just on midnight; an' faither was glad, an' went away to hide his joy; an' just three minutes after the breath he'd fought so brave for was out of his li'l body, in comed parson, like the gude Christian he was at heart. I went down to open the door, an' he stood on the step, an' talked beautivul, as if it was sermon-time. I bided mute

under the stars, I mind, an' stared at un while he rambled on full of comforting wisdom an' larning. Then he said as how he'd made it a matter of prayer, an' how on his knees, after his clothes was off, he'd been told to come there an' then, an' not waste a moment, or bide till day, but set off straight, so's the baby should go to heaven, an' the rights an' wrongs of the case be settled there.

"You'm very kind, but the child's just gone dead, your holiness," I said to the reverend man.

He gived a groan like, then axed:

"The mother?"

"Best not face her," I told him. "For she'll do herself or you a injury, like as not, if she sees you now, sir. She was so set 'pon having her little one go to heaven." So he heaved a sigh, an' went off.

And that's how Strickland's child an' Polly's comed in the world an' went out of it a double heathen—by his birth an' by his death. 'Tis only the gudeness of the lovin', watchin' God, you mind, as can find any place for the likes of that child. So 'tis hid in shape of a li'l heath-hound, and roams the high lands with the rest, doin' faithful dooty there in storm an' shine, at the heels of the Evil One, year 'pon year, until the Crack o' Doom.

As if that wasn't all a pair o' young shoulders could carry, there comed bad news of the man three months after, an' Mary, who had never got over her child's death, 'peared to fling up all care for life then. For, you see, his name was in a list of the killed. A Okehampton chap see'd it to Exeter printed out there. An' my sister just withered away after that shock, an' never a young woman welcomed death so willing as she.

But there'd been a mistake, or else the man to Okehampton had misread, for Charlie Strickland, though wounded, weren't dead by no means, an' when he did come back a year later to marry her —a real hero now, wi' a trail of glory after him as long as a comet—the clods were growed together over her.

He felt so much as a man built his way can feel. Then he went back again to the sojers an' was seen no more by us; but afore he went he cut a butivul bit of freestone wi' his own hands, an' carved two fat-faced cherubim 'pon it, an' told in tall letters how that Mary Applebird lay onderneath, an' how that the stone was a lovin' tribute to her memory, set there by Sergeant Charles Strickland, of the English Light Cavalry, as fought the Roosian Army to Balaclava, under his greatness the Earl of some place—I forget where. Then the stone said how Strickland had killed three men, an' been wounded all over, but hanged on to his horse an' got out of it by a miracle, an' recovered wi' the loss of two fingers. Last it telled about his medals.

An' when the man was gone, seein' his monument 'peared to be one word for our Polly an' a hunderd for hisself, my brothers pulled up the stone an' broke it in pieces, an' throwed it out of the churchyard. An' when he heard what they had done, Parson Smedley talked a deal about such high-handedness, but did nought.

I've often wished as I could hear the tail-end of Strickland's history; but 'tis hidden. He was a chap bound to go up or down—couldn't bide quiet in a peaceful callin' along of his restless mind.

XVII

PROVIDENCE AND TOMMY CAUNTER

As I've ALWAYS MAINTAINED, we don't know our luck, and we don't know our danger, and we don't know our fortune, till time have passed and the good or bad thing lies behind us. Then we look back and the scales fall from our eyes, and we see what we've lost or won. Life's a difficult thing at best, and so's Death; but the secret of facing 'em both is not to be frightened. In fact, nothing much matters, so long as you can keep your nerve about it.

But you want a high pitch of understanding to do that, and when trouble overtook me at twenty-seven years of age I didn't keep my nerve, nor yet my temper, and I said things about Providence—at the Jolly Welcome and also in my Aunt Sarah's cottage—that I'd blush for now, if only I could remember 'em.

'Tis a very safe rule generally to speak of other people as you find 'em, and not take the opinion of second parties, but rely on your own experience. If a man cheats you, you ain't going to believe somebody else who vows the rascal's honest. But that rule don't hold with Providence, and only a very rash and reckless chap will say rude things against Providence, just because he's

under the weather, and life ain't turning out to his liking. 'Tis an own-self way to look at it, and very improper, I'm sure, to throw the blame on Providence, when so like as not the blood in our veins and the brains in our own heads be making all the trouble, and Providence so innocent as the babe unborn.

Not but, when young Betty Blades said she'd marry me, I wasn't grateful enough to Providence, I'm sure. I'd courted the toad for three year, and her corn-coloured hair was the light of my life, and her blue eyes—so hard as heaven—had gone through my soul ever since first I saw them. But all the fret and trouble and all the jealousy and sleepless nights that belonged to the waiting time were forgotten when she said 'Yes' at last, and I felt that life was come to be a bountiful thing, and no man so lucky as me.

And very heartily I thanked God and grandfather—one so much as t'other, because without grandfather the luck would never have come. Of course, if I hadn't been love-blind, I should have seen another side to it, and even as I stood—an accepted man and very near light-headed with joy—I felt a bit of a stab now and again when I realised that my dead grandfather had a lot more to do with my good fortune than what I had; but there's nobody can convince a man like he can convince himself, and I very soon put that side of the subject away as a thing of no account. You see, my mother's father left her all his money—two thousand pounds and a wee bit over—and it was set down in his will that if she, his only daughter, died afore him, I, his eldest grandson, was to have the cash. And that's what happened. Mother died a good

few year afore grandfather, and as he'd got no use for anybody but me, and never took any account of my sister and brother, I inherited his fortune.

And the day we buried him I met Betty by accident as I was walking home alone from the funeral. She was going back-along too, from gleaning, and I carried her sheaf for her, and she comforted me a good bit about grandfather; and I comforted her also about a little matter. To tell truth, I could only pretend I was sorry for her, because Betty's bother had to do with a young farmer, by name of Gregory Dench, who'd also been courting her, and who had suddenly cooled off, for private reasons. And of course Betty could only pretend she was sorry for me, because grandfather had been well stricken in years and his death was natural, and Betty, who belonged to a family of labouring people poor as church mice, knew very well that two thousand pounds means eighty pounds a year or more, all honestly come by and not a stroke of work to do for it.

So she wasn't sorry for me really, and very soon dropped the subject of grandfather and began to talk about herself.

"Us have always been very good friends," she said, "and I've got to thank your sense and good advice for more than you know. Time and again you've said the word in season, Tommy Caunter, and time and again I've followed your advice, to my profit."

That was news to me, and I said so.

"I've given you one bit of advice, I know," I answered her, "and that's to marry me, and I wish you would take it."

"'Twas only father stood in the way," she answered, and her bright eyes didn't wink at the lie. Not that it was more than half a lie, for Ben Blades couldn't be said to have liked the thought of me as a son-in-law; but he was dough in his daughter's hands, and if she had wanted me, not twenty fathers would have kept her out of my arms. Yet, on that eventful forenoon, after I had put away my kind old man, Betty was gentler than I had known her for a twelvemonth—full of human nature, you might say, and tender as a wood-dove.

She said the world was hard for a maiden without anybody to stand up for her, and I took the line of cussing Gregory Dench, and reminded her what I'd always said and thought of the shiftless creature.

"'Tis his mother have got him away from you, Bet," I said, "and a bad day's work for him, I grant, because you'd have been a tower of strength to such a feeble man; but a good day's work for you. You'd have had to make bricks without straw in that quarter, and money's not everything; and, anyway, 'twould have taken more than he's got, or Nine Trees Farm be worth, to gild the pill of Gregory Dench and his mother combined."

And then I warmed to my work, and told her there was better and more promising men than Gregory round about, and so was just coming to myself again, when I smelled grandfather's grave and heard the earth fall on his bit of elm, and sighed and changed the subject.

We'd got to the village by then, and chanced to meet Benjamin Blades, her father. He was gracious too, and, being a keen chap in my way

and not easily hoodwinked, I instanter thought as he must have heard how grandfather had left me his money. We'd kept it to ourselves, my Aunt Sarah and me, and didn't know a soul had wind of it as yet; but these things fly through keyholes and up chimneys—the Dowl only knows how they get out. Certain it was that Ben knew somehow that I had been uplifted, else he wouldn't have looked at me; but he showed himself as friendly as you please, and even axed me to call in that evening and have a drop and a tell along with him.

I hesitated, and then Betty said ditto.

"Us be all alone," she said, "for Jane's to work again, now her bad leg can hold her up, and mother's nursing Mrs. Cozens, and Samuel and Billy be both harvesting along with Noah Bassett at Huccaby."

Then I said I'd look round; and, come nightfall, I did so.

Ben weren't to home when I'd got there; but Betty was, and she explained that her father had gone round to the Jolly Welcome for a bottle of strong waters.

"He don't touch it often," she told me, "but now and then he've a fancy for a drop, and to-night, along of the drouthy weather and the day's work, he wants it, and hopes you'll help him."

Well, I used the time to good purpose, you may be sure, and Betty was that oncoming I had much ado to believe it was real; for she met me half-way this time, and before her father come back with his bottle, be gormed if we weren't tokened! She was careful to say it weren't the money; but, with my arms around her, and my

lips on hers—those lips I'd longed to kiss for three years—you may be sure I didn't want no details. She'd got to love me well enough to wed me, and that was all I cared a button about, of course. Nothing else mattered then, and, when Ben Blades came along, the first thing he saw was his girl on my lap, and well content to be there. Ben weren't so much surprised as I expected; but said that though Betty had looked to the right and to the left, yet, in her heart of hearts, 'twas me she always meant to take, sooner or later.

"And you mustn't, on any account, think it was this here dollop of money," explained my future father-in-law to me. "Far from it. Indeed, long before your old gaffer died, my girl said to me that the very next time you asked her she was going to say 'Yes,' and have done with it. And as to Farmer Dench to Nine Trees, think no more of him," he continued. "I never would have accepted him for Betty. He's a slack-twisted, know-nought fool, and no husband for my fine girl."

Well, I didn't want to go into all that, and we just turned to the whisky and drank good luck to ourselves, and so on; and when we was market-merry—or I was; for, to do him justice, I fancy Ben kept pretty wide awake—then he axed me about my money, and how it was invested, and other questions which I was powerless to answer at the time.

However, it all promised well, and I stood a marked man in a week, for then 'twas out that Ben's maiden had took me, and that I'd got grandfather's money. Everybody was wondrous kind, except Farmer Dench, for, though a slight

sort of man, he proved a bit obstinate, and wouldn't say 'Good-bye' to Betty without a struggle. The trouble there was his mother, for Dench had a tidy place, and made both ends meet, year by year, with a few pounds put away to goody as well; but his mother had took a fierce dislike to Betty's character, and so she managed to keep Gregory Dench off her, though at some cost. Because, too often them that do their duty by us, and strive to help us, even though they succeed, don't get no thanks, and Gregory cussed his mother for an obstinate and jealous fool, and said she was a silly creature as couldn't make up her mind to have another woman to reign at Nine Trees, and so on. But his mother didn't mind much what he said and thought of her, so long as she kept him from marrying Betty. And no doubt she guessed I was an angel sent from Heaven to help her son out of his fix.

So I got her, and then, as if that weren't enough fortune, grandfather's lawyer was able to tell me my money was good for much more than eighty pounds a year. Sharp as a needle in such matters was Lawyer Coode, of Ashburton, and he very soon showed me that I might have a safe hundred a year instead of eighty.

"You can't take less than five per centum nowadays," he said, "and there's some reason to expect even more than that. You're fortunate, Tom Caunter, to get this trifle just now, because such an investment as I can offer you don't go begging long, and only a bit of pure luck sends it to you."

'This trifle,' he called my two thousand pounds! But, no doubt, to Nicholas Coode,

with all the uppermost people's business in his hands, it seemed a sum of no account. An old firm of good renown, you see, and Nicholas had followed his father and his grandfather before him in the business, and was as well thought upon as they had been.

So he did me that good service, and transferred my money from some silly old stuff, where grandfather had put it, to a modern business—china clay works on Dartymoor it was, and within a ride from Princetown. In fact, on a Sunday morning, a month later, I took my pony and went up over to see the place, and felt, of course, 'twas mine, in a manner of speaking. But as yet the ground weren't much more than scratched, though any seeing eye could tell there was going to be fine beds of china clay turned over presently.

The banns was up, and me and Betty had heard 'em given out for the first time of axing, when two terrible awkward things fell upon me in one and the same night. In fact, I don't know which of they two events hit hardest. As for the first, Betty explained the mystery away, so I had to let it go on her word, liking it little, however; but the second nobody explained away, for 'twas beyond the power of man so to do.

I was going over to Ashburton to see Lawyer Coode, and sign some documents and take up my shares in the King Tor China Clay Company, when, walking on the grass-side by New Bridge over Dart, who should I find but my Betty and Farmer Dench! They was sitting on the bridge, a lot closer together than there was any need, and if his arm weren't round her waist, then I can't see by moonlight. At any rate, there was no

mistaking the parties, and I drew up and got a bit sarcastic about it.

But Betty had a tongue like a razor, and I very soon found that it was me began to look the fool, not them.

"You ban't the only man in the world, Tom, my dear," she said. "And because I'm tokened to you, that's no reason why I shouldn't take a walk with anybody else. 'Tis a free country," she said, "and if me and Greg here can't exchange opinions without getting your shirt out, then I reckon I shall have to think twice, my darling Tom, though the banns be up; because I'm a large-minded woman, and Greg's a large-minded man, and you cut a very poor figure afore us, goggling your eyes and trying to say nasty things, and only saying silly ones."

"Evil be to him who evil thinks," put in Farmer Dench; and then I'm sorry to say I lost my temper and swore that for two pins I'd knock 'em both in the river!

They laughed at that, and Betty told me to run about my business and not make a show of myself.

"The very owls be laughing at you, you dear creature," she said. "So just cool down and trot off to Ashburton; and, if we don't grow tired of waiting, we'll bide here and all walk home together."

"Respect yourself and then others will respect you, Tom Caunter," added Gregory; and with that I left 'em—in a proper hell of a temper. I heard 'em laughing before I was out of earshot, and I didn't calm down again till I lifted the knocker at Lawyer Coode's. Then another strange thing overtook me, for his housekeeper

came out with a bit of puzzling news. Nicholas Coode weren't home, and he hadn't been home for a week. Nobody, high or low, could tell what had befallen him, and the general opinion was that he'd been drowned in Dart, or else lost his memory, and forgot his name, and been locked up in a hospital, as happens sometimes with busy people. But, anyway, he had disappeared into thin air, as the saying is, and nought was to be done but trapse home again a good bit down-daunted. Not that I troubled overmuch about the lawyer, because I doubted not a famous man like him couldn't be hid long; but when I got back to New Bridge, and found Dench and Betty had gone, I did feel a lot put about. In fact, I got terrible melancholy, and to finish up with, when I reached home, my Aunt Sarah, who kept house for me in them days, had the toothache and was quotted over the fire, and much too sorry for herself to be any comfort to me.

So I just hid my feelings and went to bed, though, if I'd been a proper nephy, I did ought to have forgot my own troubles and gone out to the chemist for the poor woman.

But next day it was all right with Betty, because she come round before breakfast in great humility. She begged me to forgive her; and a man like me, that never harboured vengeance against a mouse, soon did so. She said as Dench had given her a drop of sloe gin before they started on their walk, and that it had got in her head and made her upsome and saucy, and she vowed as she'd never go out with him or any other man again—except me. And Aunt Sarah went off and had her tooth drawed the first minute she could, so she was all right too.

But it weren't till ten days later that we found that Lawyer Coode was all right also; and, at the same time, me and a good few other unfortunate people found we was all wrong. In a word, he'd bolted, and when his affairs was looked into they found proper ruination. The best part of twenty thousand pounds that anointed scamp had got off with, and such was his cleverness that, though they hunted to the ends of the earth for him, he was never seen nor heard about again. A terrible come-along-of-it, and not a few widows and orphans left with nought afore them but the workhouse. And my little lot was gone along with the rest; for the King Tor China Clay folk had never heard of me, or seen the cash. In fact, the wily dog took every penny he could claw together, including his own old housekeeper's savings. And him a regular church-goer, if you can believe it, and Captain of the Church Lads' Brigade!

They said that he'd gone to America, or maybe Australia, if not South Africa, under a false name; but they never took him, and I never saw my two thousand pounds no more.

When the murder was out, I went up the next evening to Ben Blades for a bit of consolation.

He said the world was divided into two sort of folk, fools and knaves, and, so far as he could see, an honest man was as rare as a November swallow. In fact, he was properly angry with me, and not sorry for me at all; and he said a thing or two that made my head spin. And there wasn't no more whisky going nor nothing like that. He talked a lot about the trouble that fools make in the world, and said he never guessed I could be such a zany; then, sudden as

a crisshawk striking, he told me that I mustn't expect to marry Betty now all my money was gone.

"Not at once—I know that," I said. "'Tis a difference of a hundred a year, not to name a bit over for furniture; and as I get but twenty-five bob a week, I quite understand we can't join yet, though the banns have been cried and everything done right and regular. I'm a very reasonable sort of man," I told Benjamin Blades, "and don't ask for impossibilities."

He grumbled and left it at that; and then, deadly slow, but sure, Betty began to cool off me. There was always a chance the lawyer would be catched, of course, so she didn't hurry; but as time went on, and nothing turned up, she drifted slowly away, and, though I could ill believe my senses, the fearful truth soon stared me in the face. 'Twas then, as it seemed, Providence, that had hit me such a cruel knock, did Gregory Dench a proper good turn; for his mother dropped—an ailing woman always, and only her pluck had kept her going so long. But she went to her grave, and so there was nothing left to keep Gregory in two minds about Betty; and, before you could blow your nose, she'd thrown me over for good and all and gone to him.

Yes, she could do that and face the countryside as if it was an everyday sort of adventure for an honest woman; and her father backed her up, saying that you never know when you've got to cut a loss, and explaining that his fine girl mustn't be suffered to grow into an old maid just because my luck was out and I couldn't afford to wed her. And a good few agreed with Ben Blades, though most of my neighbours felt sorry

for me and thought it terrible hard lines. Yet all, somehow, agreed that Betty couldn't in reason be asked to wait till my wages went to thirty bob—a thing that didn't promise to happen in a minute by any means.

So I lost her, and I began talking pretty loud against Providence; and such was the nature of my misfortunes that they had a funny side for other people, as our misfortunes often have; for many folk, who never laugh at anything else, can always manage to squeeze out a bit of a smile at a friend in trouble.

I dare say it took me ten year to live that adventure down, and even then I shouldn't have done so but for Betty Blades herself. She took Dench, of course, as soon as Gregory's mother went underground, and then, little by little, the dead woman was proved right, and the living man found himself terribly mistaken. And I, dwelling almost at their door, you may say, was in the very peculiar position of watching happen to Gregory Dench all the things that would have happened to me. 'Tis too painful a subject to go over year by year, but, in a word, Betty turned out a proper she-devil as a wife, and Greg talked about her openly as 'the terror that flieth by night,' and other such-like names, before he'd been wedded two years. She was far too clever for him, and had him under her heel from the first; and I knew enough of my own character to be fatal sure my position as her husband would have been just the same. She spent his money with both hands, and soon tore the heart out of his savings. She was a great gadabout also, and the only useful thing which she might have done, which was to bring him a babby or two, she

didn't do. She scolded and bullied him and kept him awake of nights; she fed him ill and spoke scornfully of him afore the people; she made him a figure of fun and broke his heart. Such treatment soon left its mark on the man, and, my eyes being sharp to note every turn of the tragedy, I watched how the grey began to come into Gregory's hair, and his back to get round, and his head to droop, like a tree that's forced to fight the fierce unsleeping wind. He lost his old smart look, and was a lot oftener in the Jolly Welcome than what he used to be; and it shook him off his churchgoing also, and spoiled his usefulness in a good many directions. Ten year he had of it, and all that time I used to say, as I watched the man, "There, but for the mercy of God, goes Tommy Caunter!"

And, as for me, in fullness of time I took Jane White—one of the Postbridge Whites she was, and a happy and fortunate match we made. She died a bit ago, having lived just five years over our silver wedding; and never a man was more blessed in his mate and childer than me. But, of course, a fierce and reckless creature like Betty couldn't be expected to come to no silver wedding. Women must take a bit of thought for their men if they want luxuries of that kind. In fact, Gregory Dench died, a worn-out, broken creature, in his fifties, and them who ministered to him at the last, of which his wife wasn't one, heard him say that Death was the only friend he'd got left.

So, looking at it all round, I felt my two thousand pounds was terrible well spent, and the way of God was justified afore my eyes, and His mercy and loving-kindness made clear to me. And nowadays, when I hear impatient, rude

people crying out and saying things disrespectful to Providence, I say: "Wait—wait, you silly creatures, and give Heaven its own time." Yet, even so, life's all a mystery, and the way of it hidden beyond our sharpest sight. For why was Dench delivered to the lions, in Bible phrase, and why was I saved? Who can answer that deep question?

Yes, and Betty's still living. She's a huckster down to Plymouth now. Married again, she did —a man who hadn't heard her history with her first. And yet, by all accounts, she's quite successful with the second. 'Tis said they get on and make money; so no doubt the devil have died down out of her in her old age. Human nature's like that. You can't make no hard and fast rules for it, or argue from one case to another. 'Tis just a nest of astonishments, with about one pleasant surprise to every ten of the other sort.

XVIII

THE TWO WIDOWS

PRIDE BE ALL RIGHT in its place, and I wouldn't give a rap for man or mouse without it; but there's proper pride and silly pride, and I'm reminded of a fine tale of a woman's pride that be worth telling.

'Twas a case of rivalry between Jenifer Hearn and Sarah Jane Smerdon from the first, and both were stupid, obstinate creatures with fighting blood in their veins. They lived in a pair of semi-detached cottages down where the road drops over Webburn River, afore it rises into Widecombe; and their state in life was pretty equal, for each was the wife of a terrible poor man, and neither had got any children nor anybody to trouble about 'em. But Mrs. Hearn had never had no children, whereas Sarah Jane Smerdon bore two babies; and one falled in the river and was drowned, and t'other lived to be up home fourteen years old and then perished of neglected measles. So Sarah Jane always had her children as a feather in her cap, though Jenifer Hearn pretended 'twas nothing. Indeed, when talking to neighbours, she slighted Sarah Jane a good bit on that very 'count, and said that 'twas a pity, since the Lord sent Mrs. Smerdon

childer, He hadn't given her brains enough to look after them.

Thomas Hearn was a datcher—a thatcher, as we must call it nowadays—and even in his time thatching was going out a good bit, and he didn't get so much work as he could do. But, little though it was, Thomas found it too much, for a lazier and more worthless dog never let a woman labour for him. He loafed and drank and poached, and 'twas said that he'd willingly go ten mile out of his way any morning to avoid a bit of work. But his wife could see no wrong in him, and stood up for him afore the nation, and toiled ceaselessly for him, and thought nothing too hard if 'twas for his pleasure. She spoiled the man, and wouldn't hear a word against him, though Mrs. Smerdon often itched to speak it; while on her side Jenifer properly hated Mark Smerdon, and pitied his wife behind her back for having such a useless terror of a husband.

No doubt 'twas six of one and half a dozen of the other where the men were concerned; but, for my part, I think Mark Smerdon was more weak than wicked. He hadn't no more sense than, please God, he should have. He lived by cutting clothes-pegs and weaving willow baskets, and none could say he didn't do the work very proper, though of course there was terrible little money to it. But the poor soul had a weakness, and once or twice he'd helped himself to a neighbour's chicken. And twice he got two months' hard labour; but it didn't cast him down, and he came back among the people with a smiling face. And his wife wouldn't take much account of it either. You see, the cruel rivalry

between the women shut out everything else from their lives. They didn't look out at the world, and seek large views, and larn from experience; they only looked over each other's back walls at the doings of each other's husbands, and all the world was narrowed down to that. So Sarah Jane Smerdon openly said, when Mark was put away for taking Farmer Windeatt's poultry, that if justice prevailed, Thomas Hearn ought to be locked up likewise. Because Thomas was a rare poacher, and at Bag Park and Heatree and Lizwell, and a score of other places famous for birds and beasts and fish, he was only too well known. But the skill of the man proved such that none could lay him by the heels. Nobody ever catched him with a feather about him, nor yet a scale of a fish nor a fleck of fur; but what everybody knowed not a soul could prove, and so he went on his way rejoicing.

But long afore they were old women the same fate overtook both Jenifer and Sarah Jane; and first Mrs. Hearn had to bid farewell to Thomas for ever, because he met with a fatal accident while thatching a great rick down to Merripit farm at Postbridge. Some said he wasn't sober, and some said he was; but, be that as it may, he falled off on his head, and broke his neck, and was took home dead. A heavy blow for Jenifer; and then, almost afore Hearn was settled down into his grave, and his widow was smarting to know how she would fight t'other woman now, with her husband took from her, if Mark Smerdon didn't drop out too!

A most unforeseen thing, of course, but he went gathering withies in the wet for basket-making, and he catched an inflammation of the breathing

parts, and afore you could look round the man was fighting for his life. And not only him, for none ever worked at a sufferer like Sarah Jane worked at her husband, and if nursing could have kept the man alive it would have been done. His time was come, however, and he had to go—only a bare six months after the other man; and both was in the sixties and no more—a very early age for this part of the country.

Such is human nature, unfortunately, that Smerdon's end cheered up Jenifer uncommon. "They laugh loudest that laugh last," she said to her friends. "Sarah Jane had the whip-hand when my Thomas died, but now where is she? 'Tis my turn."

The men were buried side by side in the north quarter of the churchyard; and then the next great struggle in the rivalry of Jenifer and Sarah Jane began, for they wasn't the sort to sink their differences in the pit. Far from it. The contest growed sharper and sharper; and then that happened that made the people think Jenifer had won, and that Sarah Jane would be forced to take second place for evermore.

Both widows made a good deal of their trouble, of course; but time passed, and people didn't pay no more heed to them than they do to anybody else that happened to lose their partner, until there suddenly sprang up a very lordly masterpiece over Thomas Hearn's dust. Then there was awakened a bit of excitement and interest to see such a brave cross of moorstone, pretty well covered with writing. Because it told how the loving widow of the dead had set it up to mark his many virtues. There was a beautiful rhyme, too, and, since not another tombstone

had the same verse, it got abroad as Mrs. Hearn had invented it herself; and when she was taxed with so doing she didn't deny it. So the people saw she must have loved Thomas indeed to have actually rose to rhyme for him. I call home the verse very well, and it ran like this:

> A faithful wife do set this here
> Above her vanished husband dear,
> Who peacefully beneath doth lie,
> To waken in Eternity.

Of course Mrs. Hearn became the heroine of the hour, and so soon as the tomb was up she took to going to church—a thing she hadn't done afore. And she might be seen by the grave every Sunday, giving the stone a polish, or tidying up the primrosen she'd planted, and one thing and another. And she let it be understood that the affair, with its curb and finishings, had cost ten pound, which amazed the folk still more. Then a chap or two privately asked Abel Pierce, the man that made it, if what she said was true. And he allowed it was. "Ten pound I charged—for ready money; and I'm paid," said Pierce.

Everybody praised Mrs. Hearn a lot, you may be sure, for she was poor as a coot, and there could be no doubt that she'd scrimped and screwed something fearful, and toiled early and late at her charing and chores to save such a pile of money. And she'd meet the people by the grave-side Sundays till the excitement wore off, and speak very big about what the widow owes to her dead mate, and look across at Mark Smerdon's grave and shrug her shoulders. "Some as talk a lot seem to think a bunch of wild flowers in a pickle-jar be all the memory

the dead can expect," she said once. "Of course some of us only feel skin-deep, and forget almost as soon as the turf be mended. But others are different."

So there 'twas: the fine cross towered above Thomas Hearn, and never a week passed but the widow went there; while as for Smerdon's resting-place, it looked as if Sarah Jane was knocked right out, and felt 'twas idle to go in competition with a woman who could save ten pound inside a year. She kept very quiet about it, and said little, and looked to her husband's grave that it should be kept weeded and tidy, but no more. And once when she found Mrs. Hearn, pitying-like, had put a few lent-rosen [1] on the grave—what she'd got over from her own —Mrs. Smerdon showed her spirit and flung 'em into the hedge, where Jenifer couldn't fail to see 'em.

A clever man said once that, though it was very witty to teach a stone to talk, 'twas terrible wicked to teach it to lie; and Sarah Jane, in her crafty way, naming no names, often declared that for her part she knew nothing sadder or shamefuller than to put things on a dead man's grave that were not true. "Better have no tombstone at all than one that tells a falsehood," she said; "for tombstones last a sight longer than them under 'em last, and a lie on a stone be handed down to other generations. And the Book says, 'Let the wicked be forgot out of mind,' or some such words. Not that I mean anybody in particular; far from it."

This was her cunning, however, to turn folks from the truth, for you'll guess that such a woman

[1] *Lent-rosen*—daffodils.

as her didn't know when she was beat. And after two year of secret labour and stinting, and living on orts and going without heat and the common needs of life, she got to her goal. The task knocked years off her days, as she always maintained, and when she died at eighty-four, 'twas almost her last word that she ought to have lived to a hundred. But, at any rate, she triumphed; her goal was reached; and what fell out I heard from Abel Pierce himself. He always laughed to remember how Sarah Jane hopped in upon him one evening after his work was over.

"I be come about a bit of a stone for my husband, Mr. Pierce," she said. "No doubt you thought to see me years sooner; but a thing like that didn't ought to be done in an indecent hurry, as often happens. And now 'tis the accepted time, and I know you'll help with a brave monument."

He answered that nothing would give him greater pleasure.

"There's a cross, you may remember, lifted up next to my husband's grave," she went on. "'Tis a bit out of the straight, I fancy, and the right curb have sunk a lot. 'Tis Thomas Hearn's stone, if I remember rightly, and the letters want painting when the widow can afford the expense."

"I'll tell her," answers Pierce, "and if 'tis another such stone that you're wanting, Mrs. Smerdon, I shall be happy to do it for ten pound. That's what it cost complete, lettering and all."

"Oh!" she says, surprised-like. "Ten pound —was that all she spent? It don't sound enough for such a wonderful man as he appears to have been, do it?"

"'Twas pretty clever for her, however, and she worked her fingers to the bone getting it together," answered the stone-cutter.

Sarah Jane seemed much surprised to hear this. "Thrift weren't among her man's good qualities, then, seemingly. She had to starve to do it, eh? Poor soul! Didn't he leave ten pound? No wonder she made a show of herself after you set the stone up. She used to stand and have a regular rally of neighbours round her after morning service. And she stands there yet, I hear; but the neighbours don't care no more, they tell me."

"A nine-days' wonder, like all such things," answered Abel Pierce. "And if you don't want a stone same as that, Mrs. Smerdon, what do you want?"

"I want a monument as high again," she answered, "and with a good bit more writing on it. I want Widecombe to know that Tom Hearn weren't the only man as died three year agone; and if it can be done in white dazzling marble instead of common moorstone, so much the better."

Abel scented a useful bit o' work, for he was a clever man and most observing, and he seed the pent-up fire and fury working out of Sarah Jane's thin face. She'd waited and watched and prayed for this, and she came to Abel with twenty pound!

"Size—size be what I want," she said. "If it can be done in marble, so much the better; but if you can't make it of marble no bigger than her granite one, then I'll have granite too, and a stone so high again as hers. She's going to her married niece for her lying-in next month, and

I want for the stone to be in its place afore she comes back."

Well, Pierce tried to please everybody always—no doubt that's why he ended his days in an almshouse—but so far as this matter was concerned, it only remained for him to do what a good customer wanted; and he did.

Mrs. Smerdon decided for moorstone by reason of the size, and Abel set to work in secret, according to her wish. He made a proper trophy very near six foot high, and fairly covered with writing; and if Thomas Hearn was an angel in disguise, according to his tombstone, then Mark Smerdon must have been a full-fledged archangel without a vartue worth mentioning as he couldn't lay claim to.

In fact, Sarah Jane got home on t'other woman every way, and poor Hearn's turn-out, already weathered a bit by winter rains and frosts, looked nothing at all when Smerdon's monument rose up, all glittering flame new, with the capital letters in gold and three rose-bushes from Newton planted in the midst.

Sarah Jane had it all managed so as it should be quite complete afore t'other widow came home; and when Mrs. Hearn arrived at church as usual the following Sunday, there was a proper crowd beside the graves, and Sarah Jane, in a new bonnet and flushed with victory till she looked ten year under her age, was the heroine of the moment. The people flocked around, and not a few, in their excitement, was actually standing on Thomas Hearn's grave to get a better view!

It pretty nigh killed Jenifer, I believe. She just staggered across and faced Sarah Jane, and

hissed and said, "You old devil, you shall rue this!" And then she tottered out of the churchyard, and never again came near her husband's grave until she went into it. That was a few year afterward. And now the other be gone too, and they lie as close as they lived. But when their graves open and the Trump calls 'em, no doubt they'll face eternity in a different spirit; for if us must live and let live in this short life, be sure t'will be more than ever needful to do so in the next.

XIX

THE PROMISE

LIFE DO LOOK more and more like a game, the older I grow; and once I had a pretty proud fancy I was playing the game very clever, and sure to win handsomely if I only kept my head, and my temper, and my health, and a few other things that also go to success. But as I got older and older, with the game still to win, I began to feel that the interest was shifting a bit, and that I wasn't pulling the strings no more. You get your childer and you order them; but if you live long enough you'll find the boot's on the other leg, and they'll order you. For now they are in the centre of the stage, playing at hero and heroine; and you are no more interesting or important than any other old man or woman. And to accept the situation is hard for some natures, but never for mine. I do what I'm told nowadays, and I don't ask my childer to remember the past; because, if I was to do so, they'd only tell me that I did no more than my duty—same as they are doing theirs. And what could I say then? But there's the grandchildren now, thank God, and I'm a bit of a hero to them still, I do believe.

Then, again, on a larger view, you may say

that we don't play the game of life at all, but we *are* the game, and have to do what we must, same as billiard balls struck by a cue, or cards thrown 'pon the table on one another. Then, according to our value, shall we take the tricks or lose 'em. So at least it seemed in the very remarkable case of Luke Benjamin; and he showed this, among other things, that a man's value depends upon a lot that's hidden from mortal eyes—which is only to say, in the Lord's own words, that the stone the builders reject may become the head of the corner.

Not that you could fairly blame any builder for rejecting Luke Benjamin, and even the Architect didn't use him for his virtues, seeing that virtue had been left out of the unfortunate creature altogether; but he was, nevertheless, a man with the rights of a man, and in this law-abiding and reasonable place he was so regarded; while as for his Maker, He too let Luke have his proper value, and showed to the world how the very least pawn on the board may come to alter the whole battle and block danger for his betters, or turn a losing game into a winning one.

Luke Benjamin, as the name would tell you, was a foreigner. He might have been fifty years old when he came to Princetown, and during his grown-up life he'd worn out his welcome from one end of the West of England to the other. A very worthless good-for-nought, and his name to a policeman or Justice of the Peace was like a red rag to a bull.

And then, when in despair they told him at Plymouth Police Court they'd let him free if he'd only take himself out of the town and never set foot in it again, he consented, and broke new

ground and came up to Princetown, on Dartmoor. But though it wasn't the place for him, for they all work hard there — from choice or need — yet he assured me that the sight of the convicts was always a great pleasure and interest to him. In fact, he'd spend hours and hours hanging over a gate watching 'em work; and he'd gaze into the faces of the 'grey birds' and try to trace crime in 'em, and wonder what each man had done to earn quod.

"But for the grace of God I might be among 'em!" he said once to me; and I said: "Don't you dare to take the Name, Luke Benjamin— a worthless wastrel like you! You ought to be among 'em, in my opinion," I said, "and you're heading for it; and I'll be bound a lot of these poor fellows don't deserve their trouble half as much as you do."

But he argued against me very steadfast.

"I've got a peaceful nature by birth," he said, "and my only sin against the State is that I was born with a fatal objection to work. 'Tis a very common human weakness, and when it happens in a man who's got plenty of cash—earned by somebody else, most times—nobody grumbles, and the man is just as respectable and well thought upon as any other man. So that shows it's not a crime against the State to be idle. But when a man like me, with no appetite for work, just asks to be left alone, then somebody must be up in arms and buzzing at him, and threatening and bullying and preaching and shouting him down, and all the rest of it. Same with the drink. If I'd got a castle to be drunk in, and a lot of footmen to carry me upstairs afterwards, nobody would think any the worse of me; but I've only

got the street; and the police never will understand that the gutter was made for gentlemen like me, and that I've a perfect right to be there. No, they must come and pull me out and drag me off to the lock-up, as if I'd stole a purse or robbed a till. But one has got to be patient with the police. In fact, if you're my sort, you've got to be patient with every fool. We're not understood."

I chid him oft, but it was all in vain.

"Won't do," he'd say. "I owe my life to you, and I'll pay the debt some day; but that'll be as God wills. It'll happen, no doubt, for it's fixed very firm in my mind that I shall reward you richly."

And there it was. Luke sang my praises and agreed with my opinions, and hated my enemies and stuck up for my friends. In fact, he'd do anything mortal man could do for me—anything but work for me.

It happened that I won his friendship by a simple act of charity; and perhaps even that I might have shirked if I'd known who it was that I entreated well. I was riding home to Brownberry Farm, after a drink at the Duchy Hotel, and there, what should I see at the elbow of the road, by Cherrybrook Bridge, but a man lying on his face. He was in rags, and I thought him dead. So I lit down from my hoss and turned him over, and found Luke Benjamin. 'Twas dusk of an October evening, I remember, and then Luke came to his senses, and there was something about the chap's face that reminded me of my dead brother Peter.

He lied to me at the time, and I didn't hear anything about the truth of him till long after.

But he merely said he was tramping across Dartmoor to the sick-bed of his son at Ashburton, and, being without food or drink, he'd fallen by the way. He prayed for a shelter and a bit of straw for the night, so I put him on my hoss and walked to my place, not a mile from where I picked him up.

He got his shake-down and supper, and blessed me and my wife and children, and asked us to pray for his sick boy. Then I locked him into a shippon, where he couldn't do no hurt; and in the morning he said he'd slept very well and was feeling pretty good again. And then he refused to go. I reminded him about his sick boy, which he seemed to have forgotten, and he told me there was no danger; and later in the day he confessed that he hadn't got no sick boy.

"In fact, I haven't got anybody in the world belonging to me," he said. "And I don't belong to anybody. But you're a good Samaritan, farmer, and it shan't be said that I'm ungrateful. You'll never regret your great Christian kindness to me. And no more shall I. Your reward is certain. I'll stop along with you for a week, if you please; and I don't say but I might mend a chair or two for you, if you'll get the cane. But be that as it will, I shall feel very kindly to you all, and be pleased to teach your sons a thing or two that they'll never regret learning."

Well, I reckoned that what he could teach my sons was little likely to help 'em in this world or the next; but if you'll believe it, the clever dog set about their lessons that very day; and what he did strive to put into Thomas and Arthur was a higher respect and regard for me! He sang my praises, I do assure you, to everybody at Brown-

berry, my wife included; and what could I do but laugh and let him stop his week?

But talk about idleness! I never saw such idleness, and should not have thought it possible. A snail was a busy bustling animal to Luke Benjamin. 'Twouldn't have troubled him in the least to be turned into stone, except for the smoking and drinking. He'd sit in the farmyard by the hour, just studying the creatures and their ways. He was full of wise sayings about 'em; and he was quite a pious man in his general opinions, you might say, though his ideas never took no practical shape. He held that he was made in his particular pattern for the Lord's purposes; and he assured me it would be an ungrateful thing for him to wish himself better or different. Little by little the truth of him came out. He swore he was honest, and I believe that he was.

"Satan may find some mischief still for idle hands to do," he granted, "but not with a man like me. I'm far too lazy to tempt Satan or any other leading personage. I haven't got the nature to go to extremes in any direction whatever."

Of course he didn't mend no chairs or anything like that. Sometimes he'd talk, and he was always interesting to listen to; but often he was too lazy even to talk. Then he'd be silent for days, sitting out in the yard or under a stack; and now and again he'd go up to Princetown, just for the pleasure of watching the prisoners at their out-door labours. My boys liked him, and so did my wife, and he liked them; but I was his hero, and he'd praise me to my face without a blush, and never tire of saying that I was entertaining an angel unawares, and that some fine day

he'd more than make up to me for my friendship and charity.

He stopped in and out and about the place for six months, till the winter was gone, and then he began to get restless and presently drifted away. He said he'd come back some day, and, of course, we all said he was a good riddance; but yet we missed him—me most of all, for I'm very much like other people—a thing we admit when we're old, but deny very fierce when we're young—and I confess it was pleasant to have Benjamin think so highly of me and my opinions. Not that he ever followed them, else he'd have taken over regular work and strove to justify his existence; but no doubt it was beyond his power to do that.

He sent a letter once, three months after he had gone. A fine summer we enjoyed, and he said that he spent most of his time sleeping in the open down Salisbury Plain way; but he was coming back to see us some time, and he repeated what he said about doing me a good turn. "Be sure I shall," he said. "You might think nothing was more unlikely than for me to be able to help you, but it will happen—I'm dead sure it will some time. Not that I shall go out of my way to do you a good turn, or worry about it, or anything like that, because it ain't in my nature so to do." He wrote this too: "The Lord loveth a cheerful taker just as much as a cheerful giver, and if it weren't for such as me, who go without a shred of false pride, and accept all that's offered, and ask for more in the largest spirit possible—if it weren't for us, then the likes of you couldn't shine as you do."

And some of what he wrote came true enough,

for with the short days Luke Benjamin turned up again, and asked if he might have his straw in the shippon as before. He brought me a present of a book about artificial manures, and he brought my wife a rhyme-book, knowing her romantic feelings on that subject, and he brought each of my boys a knife. And he'd got the gifts quite clean and wrapped up in paper, though he was much as usual himself—all to pieces, with a bit of string for his braces, and his boots falling off his feet, and his hat an insult to a scarecrow.

He told us his adventures, which were not very interesting; but he was wiser than ever, and if he'd only lived as he talked Luke would have been a very successful and satisfactory man. In one way he was changed, however, and even showed a flickering interest in work. A gipsy woman had taught him to weave withies in exchange for saving her child's life in a pond. It had fallen in under his nose, so he was forced, much against the grain, to rise up and go in the water and rescue it. And now he said that, if I'd buy the withy wands, he'd willingly make me a lot of good farm baskets.

Therefore he had his osiers, and started well; but too quickly he wearied of it and passed on his knowledge to my boy, Arthur; and when Arthur could do it, Luke Benjamin never touched another withy again. But he had an argument to show that all the credit for Arthur's baskets was really his, and that the more my son turned out, the more was the honour to him, and the better we ought to feed him and treat him. He was a sort of joke around the place, but I will say he knew his luck, which is a rare branch of knowledge. He was properly grateful, and while

he took freely with both hands he never undervalued.

"You wait, farmer," he said. "It'll all be cleared up some day. I don't know how, nor yet when, but it's got to happen as time goes on. I believe in God," he says, "and I know nothing falls out without a reason. Not a louse bites my back without a reason, I do assure you, so you didn't find me and put me on your hoss and save my life without a reason, and that reason's a good one, and will most certainly come out in the end."

Upon the strength of this he stopped, and then with spring he was off again. Four years it went on so, and the only quarrel that ever he had with me was that I didn't give him enough to drink; but no doubt he made up for that when the winter was past. Moor-men called him my 'lodger,' and laughed at me a lot for being such a silly fool, which was natural enough in them; but it's easy to fall into a habit and very difficult to break away again, especially if another human creature's mixed up with it. So Luke, he came and went; and each year he was getting weaker and feebler along of his careless ways; but each year the winter with us, and the warm cast-off clothes he got, and the wholesome victuals, put him in good case again, so that, when spring came, he could go off on the tramp in pretty good condition. The last time ever he returned to Dunnabridge, he came back ill with a cough and a pain in his chest.

"'Tis all my own damned fault," he explained. "I went and did a bit of work, and now I'm punished for it. After some bad luck and being took up for begging by a bobby that hid in the hedge and watched me, I wove a basket when I

came out, and went watercress-gathering. There I took a chill, along of getting wet to the knee and never minding it. And I shan't be the same man no more. I had pewmonia in the right lung, and it's a goner."

However, we pulled him together, and when he got off as usual in April he thought he was cured.

But he never came to Brownberry again, and I remember, when he was due and didn't show up, that my wife said he'd doubtless died far ways off; and my son Thomas, a very thinking mortal, called home his great promise, and pointed out how it had come to nought, like promises so often do.

But when it was over, and the crowner had sat on his bones, and we found time to figure it up, we could see plain enough that the poor wretch little dreamed he'd done the great deed he always said he would do.

Just a card he was in the game—and God knew exactly when to play him for all he was worth; and though it ain't for me to say that he saved the game for a better than himself, yet my wife and family so regarded it, and do most steadfast to this day, and my neighbours likewise.

It fell out on this fashion. We'd given Benjamin up, and—half glad and half sorry—were forgetting him, for he was a month behind time, and winter had come down upon us. Then there fell the annual supper of the Ancient Order of Buffaloes, up to Princetown, and, being a Buffalo and very proud of the Order, of course I went as usual.

Johnny Slocombe, from Dartmeet, it was who called for me; and he'd got Ted Bassett,

from Combstone, along with him in his market-cart, and Ted's son, young Ted, who was going to be made a Buffalo that very night. They stopped by appointment for me at the corner, by Brownberry Farm, and off we drove for Princetown as merry as grigs, though the night was rough and dark, and a good dollop of hail mixed with the rain. Little we knowed who was in Slocombe's market-cart with us that night!

I mind how young Ted, who was a bit nervous of the ordeal afore him, kept asking me what they did to 'e to make 'e a member of the Ancient Order, and I was poking a bit of fun at him, and told him how he'd be called upon to do all manner of fantastic things, when suddenly Johnny pulled up—so sharp that we was all very near thrown out of the cart. But none too soon had he stopped, for his hoss was very near on top of a man lying full length in the road, and 'twas only Johnny's quick sight and the brave light thrown ahead by his lamp that saved us. Even as it was, the hoss—a young, rather fidgety mare, that little liked being stopped so short and sudden—had just touched the fallen man with a forefoot and cut the flesh on his shoulder.

Well, down we jumped and fetched the lamp to the stranger; and the first thing it showed was the yellow face of Luke Benjamin. He was in a proper state of ruination—wet through and all skin and bones by the look of it; but he wasn't dead—at least, we didn't think he could be, for he was still warm to the touch; and, seeing he was right in the highway, he couldn't have dropped for long, else somebody would have found him or run over him earlier in the evening.

Of course I had to stop, the man being a friend

of mine, so to speak, and it was arranged that Slocombe and the rest should go on their way and report the trouble at Princetown, and see if they could get the prison doctor, a very merciful and kindly gentleman, to turn out and come to my help. Dark as a wolf's mouth by now it was, and blowing great guns; but with Bassett's help I carried the unconscious man into a gravel-pit not far off the road, and wrapped my heavy coat round him to keep life in his carcase, if it could be done.

They went off and left me to my watch, and I calculated that it must be a good hour and a half before rescue could be hoped for. So I set about Benjamin, and rubbed his body and slapped his chest and shouted to him; but I couldn't make him hear, and presently I felt his heart no more, and began to fear a good bit that he was gone. Time hung heavy, I do assure you, and when two hours were passed and nobody came I began to worrit, though that's a trick foreign to my nature most times. I was so cold and wet as a frog myself by now, and felt terrible sure that Benjamin was dead. But it seemed a sin to leave him, for life's a mystery, and I knew that it was quite possible he might come to and cry for a fellow-creature to help him the moment my back was turned.

It looked clear enough, of course, that the poor wretch had come back to Dartymoor as usual, and was making for Brownberry, when the storm knocked him over like a starling, and the bitter cold dropped him only three mile from his haven. So there it was, and I waited another hour, and then felt that something must be done. And, God forgive me, I was angered with Slocombe and Bassett, and actually cussed them aloud.

Smith Hill Farm happened to be the nearest human dwelling-place within reach, and there I ordained to run, for it looked now as if the prison doctor weren't going to turn out, and as if my pals wouldn't be back till after the Buffalo Supper at Duchy Hotel. I felt a good bit puzzled, naturally, and a good bit angered, I must say; for it seemed to me a thought unchristian on the face of it, and, for my part, I wouldn't have left a dog or sheep in such a plight, let alone a man. However, I didn't waste much thought on that, but just propped up Benjamin with his back against the gravel-pit, and then went off across the Moor to Smith Hill so fast as I could crawl. But the cramp was biting into my thighs something cruel, and my speed was poor. I knew Farmer French would be up-along with the Buffaloes, though his missis was safe to be home; and so she was, and when she saw my plight and heard my tale, the first thing the woman done was to pour a glass of hot brandy and water into me, and fetch a few of her husband's clothes and make me don 'em. She was like that—sense made alive, you may say. Then she set off herself with me to the gravel-pit, and there was the poor tramp just as I'd left him, with his jaw dropped and his eyes open, and the sleet slapping in his face, and the wind lifting his tattered rag of a beard. Mrs. French held the lantern to him and said he was certainly dead.

"Us'll carry him to Smith Hill," she said. "That's the best."

And she was a strong hulk of a woman, very well used to men's work, so between us we took Benjamin—a light weight enough for two. Dead he was without a doubt, but she didn't mind a

corpse more than she'd have minded a loin of beef, and decided that he'd better be left in the scullery.

"You go home," she said. "That's the place for you. You're finger-cold, and so like as not the marrow in your bones be frozen, and that's a very dangerous thing. And my husband will be back in half an hour or less, for 'tis after ten o'clock, and belike he'll throw some light upon it."

So home I tramped with my strange tale, and to bed I went, in some doubt how I'd find myself next morning.

But I was none the worse, though with day-dawn there came news that made me a melancholy and forlorn creature for many a day after. The mystery was explained afore cock-light, for then French rode over from Smith Hill and told me of the terrible and fatal things that had happened.

It was like this. At Ockerry Bridge, between Two Bridges and Princetown—a tricky place in the dark—Johnny Slocombe and his party had come to grief. What went wrong exactly won't be known till Doomsday, since there was none left to tell the tale, for Johnny had been pitched clean over the bridge into Black-a-brook, and broke his neck on the spot; and if he hadn't broke his neck, he'd have been drownded; and Ted Bassett had been crushed between the bridge and the cart, and was dead when they got to him; and young Ted still lived, but he'd fallen behind the hoss and been kicked on the head; he died thirty-six hours after without recovering his wits. A wheel was off the market-cart, and it looked as if it had given way at the bridge and so caused the fatal accident. Or, of course, by some over-

sight, Slocombe might have driven into the bridge itself, for 'twas too narrow for safety all times, and never a dab of whitewash to show it in the dark.

So that was what Luke Benjamin done for me, and, though the manner of the deed was hidden from him, yet the feeling that he'd do me a service some time was always there; and by his own death he most certainly saved my life, as every thinking man and woman agreed when the story came to be told.

'Twas a nine-days' wonder and a great sorrow to many of us, besides the widows and children. And I put up a tidy bit of moor-stone to Luke, with his name and date, for he deserved it in my judgment.

XX

THE RACING CUP

WHEN OLD NATHAN BICKFORD was pensioned off, after Squire Sanders of Dendles Court died, the new Squire gived him a gift. 'Twas a silver racing cup standing eighteen inches high and worth twenty-five pound. Old Squire's well-known galloping hoss, 'King Bruce,' had won it at Cornwood Hunt Races years and years agone.

'Twas a trophy offered to the county, but it had to be took three times afore 'twas won outright; and 'King Bruce' had done the feat in the early 'seventies. Well, Nat Bickford, who was butler to old Squire, had polished this here cup for near forty year; but young Squire didn't care a button about it, and even went so far as to say in company that 'twas a ugly eyesore, much to old Bickford's grief. Then, when he found that Nat was so terrible proud of it, he handed it over to the ancient man, and when Bickford went to end his days in a little house at Cornwood, he took the cup and kept it under a glass case. It was his greatest treasure in the world, and he never grew tired of telling how 'King Bruce' winned it for good and all in '74, and how bright and shining he'd kept it ever since. In fact,

'twas his only subject, and towards the end of his days, when he growed a bit tootlish, as old men will, he used to take the cup to bed with him and sleep with it under his pillow; and when he died the cup was in his hand, and it took a strong man to release it after.

Nathan Bickford left no will and no money worth mentioning. In fact, the only things as he did leave that were worth a rush was his good name and the silver cup. He never married, and his heirs was his two nephews—Cornwood men—brothers, both up home fifty year old.

Money's the root of all evil, as they say, and over this fine piece of silver Edward Bickford and his younger brother, Forrester, fell out very sharp and bitter. Or rather, 'twas the younger fell out, for no man ever quarrelled with the elder.

Edward was a bachelor, and kept the Seven Stars to Cornwood; while Forrester had a wife and two boys nearly grown up, and he was a very different kind of man from the publican. He worked as foreman to the Morley Clay Pits, and made pretty good money but mighty few friends. He was the hard, heartless sort.

'Twas like this when it comed to the cup: Edward claimed it as the elder, and Forrester, he swore by the Book that 'twas his, because his uncle had told him 'twas to be his when he died. But he hadn't got nothing but his oath to show for old Nathan's promise; and, as his oath was not a thing to be relied upon even at the best of times, his brother took leave to doubt it in this matter. They'd both been very friendly with their ancient uncle, and there was no reason at all why for he should have passed over the elder for the younger. And so Edward, who was as fair

and straight as his brother was shifty, reckoned to hold on to the cup. He gave his reason and made all clear; he said:

"'Twill provide a very gallant show in my bar, and be a very interesting and valuable subject to talk about for the people when they come there. And this I promise, and you can have it in writing if you mind to, that, come I die, the cup shall be left to you; and if you die first, then your eldest boy, my godson, shall have the cup."

Well, I thought, for one, that nothing could be fairer than that; and my son's friend, Dicky Reep, thought the same; and so did Arthur Haycraft, and, in fact, most of the regular visitors at the Seven Stars. But Forrester Bickford, he took it ill, and his wife took it worse.

In fact, they Bickfords grumbled a lot, and it made a feeling between the brothers that troubled the elder a good bit. A tender-hearted man always, and when Forrester wouldn't let the subject drop, Edward was very near minded to give him the cup and be done with it.

He explained to Dicky Reep and Sam Parsons and me and another few men what his view of the matter was.

"Forrester should have it to-morrow," he said, "but for one thing—and that is that he wouldn't keep it. Between you and me and the gatepost," he said, "my brother's a sporting blade and have more uses for money than his wife knows about; and if I gave him the trophy he'd turn it into cash afore you could blow your nose. Often and often have I helped him in the past, and glad and proud to do it, for what's my money to an old bachelor like me? But the cup's different. A thousand times have I heard Uncle Nat say that 'King

Bruce's' bit of silver was to be an heirloom; and 'twould surely be a very improper and indecent thing to my uncle's memory to get rid of it, or let it pass out of the family."

"And, whether or no, silver be worth little enough nowadays," said Arthur Haycraft; and he was a watchmender and such-like, and knew what he was talking about.

"If 'twas offered to me to-morrow," he declared, "I wouldn't give more than five pounds for it as an outside figure."

We had a look at it then—a terrible brave, glittering trophy, with two hosses racing for dear life o' one side, and a wreath of roses, with 'King Bruce's' name written thrice in it, on t'other. And it made a very great show in Ned Bickford's bar, and was a fine addition from every point of view.

Well, a week or two passed and Forrester come to his senses a bit and cooled down, and no more was said. But then, just as the thing lost its freshness and us got to coming and going from the Seven Stars as usual without talking any more about it, that happened that brought the matter on to every tongue again and made a nine-days' wonder for Cornwood. 'Tis talked of to this day, for that matter.

On a night in December—two days after Christmas it was—in fact, the very night after the rabbit-coursing in Edward Bickford's meadow —the silver cup was stolen. He comed down in the morning as usual and the glass case that held the cup was empty. So far as Bickford could tell afterwards, nothing else was took, and not even the till, with the best part of three pound in it, had been broke ope. There was two windows

to the bar, and one looked on the main street of Cornwood and the other into the stable-yard. And the thief had got over the stable wall, cut a bit out of the window very neat, and so turned the window-bolt and walked in. Anybody knowing the place could have done it, but nobody knowing Bickford would have played him such a dirty trick. In fact, such an idea never struck even a policeman, for 'twas known far and wide what Edward was, and the natives would never have thought of taking his cup if he'd left it on his gatepost. But there had been a lot of foreigners from Ivybridge and Plympton come up for the rabbit-coursing, and it looked pretty certain as if one of them must have noticed the cup and laid his plans and waited for night and done it. There wasn't a footprint or a finger-mark or a trace of any sort to help find the rogue, and the police didn't so much as get a clue inside the house or out. They fell over one another trying to be useful, but none could make a plan or do anything to help find the cup. The robbery was put about, of course, and mentioned far and near, because the constables reckoned the robber would sell the thing for its weight in silver; and they warned Bickford that he mustn't be hopeful about it. They held as the burglar would melt it down first thing, according to their custom in such jobs, and then he'd be safe, for nought could be proved against him after that.

The night following the robbery a good party of us was in the bar, and of course we was all full of the cup, and none but very sorry indeed for Edward's misfortune. In fact, you might say we was sorrier for him than he was for himself, for a born philosopher was that man, and never did I meet such a wonder for taking the rough

with the smooth. Contentment made alive, you might say. "When you'm having bad times, set to work to call home the good times you have had," he used to say. And I suppose he did, and 'twas that that kept him so sweet; but, for my part, it won't work with me. When your tooth be aching fit to burst a hole through your jaw, it don't help the pain to remember it haven't ached for a year.

Anyway, Bickford catched it hot from one man for losing the trophy, and that man was, of course, his own brother. Forrester Bickford hadn't heard the news till one of his sons fetched it from Cornwood, and then he grew right-down savage on the instant and come over to the Seven Stars the same evening in a rare storm of temper, and gave it to his elder brother hot and strong.

He said 'twas a scandalous piece of carelessness, and that 'twas his family quite as much as the publican that had been robbed. He said that putting it there, under the nose of every tramp as dropped in for a drink, was little better than giving it away. He reminded Edward that he'd told him a dozen times the cup weren't safe where it stood; and Edward, who was a very just man, had to admit that was so. Then Forrester axed his brother what he meant to do about it, for the sake of justice, and Ned made answer.

"I've offered five pound reward," he said. "More I can't do for the moment. Arthur Haycraft here tells me that it ban't worth a penny more than that, dead or alive."

But Forrester wouldn't hear of such a price.

"Lies and rubbish," he said. "Us know the cup cost five-and-twenty, and 'tis ridiculous nonsense to tell me 'tis only worth five. Hay-

craft's a fool to say such a thing. Or else he's a knave. No doubt he wanted it at that figure himself. And perhaps 'twas him that stole it. I'd much like to look into his workshop for one."

It happened that Arthur was in the bar himself at the time, sitting behind the screen by the fire, where Forrester hadn't seen him. And now he stuck his head around and answered rather sharp. Then my son's friend, Dicky Reep, also cut in, and so did I, and we had a fiery argument and a lot of noise over it. After that Forrester calmed down a bit, but said that his brother ought to make good the value of the cup in his will; and Edward, who didn't lack for spirit when he was roused, up and said as when it come to re-making his will, he'd do it himself and not ax for any advice from Forrester, or his family either.

With that we went at it again, like a flock o' starlings, and Policeman Gee dropped in then to know what the upstore was all about. He calmed us down, being by nature a heavy and slow man who puts out conversation like water puts out fire ; and so in time we changed the subject, and we fell to talking of burglaries in general and the awful cleverness of housebreakers and such-like rogues and vagabonds.

"There's not a house in Cornwood, the bank and the rectory included," said Gee, "that couldn't be broken into if the rascals was minded to do it. Bolts and bars be nothing against 'em. They'll melt the lock of a steel safe with their instruments so easy as you could melt a tallow candle."

And he went on to tell us some amazing things that he'd heard but a week before from an

inspector, who'd come from Plymouth to see about Bickford's cup. Then Forrester took t'other side, according to his cranky habit, and said 'twas all stuff about robbers doing such deeds single-handed.

"They'm always helped from inside the house," he said. "You'll always find as they've got an accomplice."

"Not always," answered Gee. "For instance, 'tis pretty well known that nobody here helped the anointed scoundrel that took your brother's cup."

Then Forrester, who was a bit of a drinker of a Saturday, though very careful every other day, swore as he'd like to see the burglar that would break into his house; and Arthur Haycraft, the watchmender, as had been waiting for his chance to get a bit of his own back, made answer. He said:

"Don't you be frightened about that, Mr. Bickford. Nobody will ever want to go into your house once they've heard your wife's tongue."

After that me and my son's friend, Reep, and the policeman also, had to stand between the men, and it took four of us to keep 'em apart. But of course Forrester would have swept the floor with Arthur Haycraft, for Arthur's a mere atomy of a man, though brave as a lion.

Still the talk went on about thieves and their ways, and we was bound to allow, one and all, that none among us had a cottage a robber couldn't pretty well walk into, if ever he was minded to do it.

"And they only don't do it," said Gee, "because us poor people haven't got nothing to steal. Our emptiness is our safety, as you may say."

Then Forrester broke out again, being a bit bosky-eyed by now, and very hard to silence once the liquor was roaming in him.

"I'd defy the devil and his dogs to get in my house," he said; "and if ever I catched a man with his foot over my window-sill I'd scat his brains out, and I should like to see the law that would prevent me."

He got a lot worse after, and begun again about the cup, and spoke so outrageous to his poor brother that Gee advised him to go home while he could still walk, and not annoy decent men. However, he would brave it out till closing time, and then policeman, who was as mild a mannered and kind-hearted a creature as ever wore blue, saw him home himself and gived him a bit of advice into the bargain.

"Wouldn't be a very difficult task to break into your brother's house to-night, I reckon," said Arthur Haycraft in his funny way.

Lord, how we laughed!

Then we all went home, and me and Haycraft and my son's friend, Dicky Reep, journeyed the same way. For my part I'd got a skinful and wasn't talkative, but Dicky and Arthur had a lot to say against Forrester Bickford, and Arthur declared that he'd terrible like to be upsides with the man; and Reep said as how he would too.

They saw me to my door and went on together, mumbling against Forrester.

"Don't you do nothing rash," was the last word I bawled out to 'em. "Because he's a fierce and wilful man, and if you was to have a bit of fun with him and break in his house, he'd shoot 'e, like a brace of partridges; and though he

might suffer under the law for it, that wouldn't be no consolation to you or your wives."

But they went off and didn't give no heed to me.

Four nights after that a terrible queer thing happened—such a thing as I never was met with in my born days—for I found myself waked from sleep betwixt three of the clock and half-past three. I couldn't believe my senses for the moment, and thought 'twas the Trump; but instead of that it turned out to be some midnight sort of man a-flinging small stones up against my chicket window. Being a widower, I lived alone with my son, in a thatched cottage on the Moor side of Cornwood; and my sleeping chamber window oped above the side door.

So up I rose, to see two dark figures standing down under on the path from my gate. I oped the casement and poked forth my head and spoke to 'em.

"If 'tis fire, say so; but I can smell nought within," I shouted.

"Ban't fire," answers a familiar voice. In fact, 'twas none other than my son's friend, Dicky Reep.

"Then what in fortune's name be it, Richard?" I axes him; "and who's t'other chap along with you down there?"

"'Tis Arthur Haycraft," answers the watch-mender in his still small voice; "and we must ax you to come down house, if you please, and let us in. Us have done a very surprising thing, and we'm a good bit younger than you and want your advice about it, for 'tis plaguy difficult to see whatever us ought to do next, if we don't want to land ourselves in a cruel mess."

"Oh jimminy, Arthur!" I says, "what an hour to come to a man for advice! Couldn't 'e bide till morning?"

But they'd take no denial, and they wouldn't go away. They was very excited, as I could hear by their noise; and as for Dicky, he was dancing about on my pathway like a cat on hot bricks.

"Come down this instant moment! 'Tis a matter of transportation, Mr. Caunter," he cries out.

So with that I had to humour the rash creatures and go.

"Bide a minute and I'll be down, then," I told 'em; and so I lit a candle and pulled on my trousers and thrust my feet into a pair of list slippers and joined 'em.

Us went in the kitchen and I flinged a scad o' peat on the fire and drawed it up a bit, and they was both very glad to catch heat from it, for the night was wet and blustering, and the young men was finger-cold and shivering at the knees.

Dicky bade Arthur tell the tale, because he had the better choice of words; and I fetched out my Plymouth gin and gave 'em both three fingers.

Then Arthur spoke.

"You mind a few nights back how that Forrester Bickford cheeked me in his brother's bar; and you mind, after, how he blew his trumpet and swaggered and said as no living man would ever have the wit to break in his house, and all that? Well, me and Dick here couldn't forget it. We talked of it for four days, and then, but yesterday, we ordained to have a bit of a practical joke at his expense and show him he weren't cleverer than other people. Of course we meant no harm, and we've done no harm, for

that matter—at least we don't reckon we have. But, in a word, me and Richard got up there after two o'clock and crept in his garden and hid there quiet as weasels for half an hour. Then, when 'twas plain not an eye opened in the place, we just lifted the latch of the parlour window with an old knife and walked in the house. Any fool could have done it as easy as saying his prayers. And Dicky's idea was just to nip into the pantry and eat every crust and bone in the house, and drink up everything also—just for the lark and to show Forrester what a silly ass he was. But my idea was better and easier. I said to Richard, 'If we get messing about with the food, 'twill take time, and he'll never tell anybody after, so we shan't score off him. Besides, he may hear, or, more like, his terror of a wife will do so. Us'll just open this here locked china cupboard,' I said, 'and carry off the first handy thing we can pocket. And then we'll lie low and see what he does about it and have our bit of fun.' And Dicky here agreed to that. So we done it with one of my tools; for such a thing was child's play to a watchmaker like me. And the first object as we found in his cupboard be in Dicky's pocket now. We didn't wait for nothing more, but was off like a shot. And knowing your cleverness and sense in a kicklish matter, we've come to you."

With that Dick drags a parcel wrapped up in a neck-comforter from his pocket and puts it on my kitchen table.

For my part, I didn't care what 'twas they might have took, but I saw the terrible dangerous side of their game and warned 'em against it very strongly.

"There'll be hue-and-cry, and you can't plead a bit of fun," I said. "If I was you," I said, "I'd go back this instant moment and drop his goods in his garden, where he can find 'em. For 'tis clear burglary, and well you know it."

"You wait a minute," answered Arthur. "There'll be no hue-and-cry—will there, Dick?"

"That I swear there will not," answered the other young man. And with that he undid the comforter and showed me what they'd been and stole.

"There!" says the watchmender. "He ban't likely to claim that in a hurry, I should reckon!"

I stared and thought the whole adventure was a dream, for, shining and glittering in the light of my candle, was Edward Bickford's racing cup!"

"Guy Fawkes and angels!" I said. "Did you ever hear the like of that? The barefaced thief!"

"'Tis easy to read between the lines, in my opinion," explained Arthur. "'Twas that rascal stole the cup, and no doubt he told himself that 'twas only justice and not robbery at all. He bets a lot, as we know, and he lost a good few pound over they rabbit-coursing matches after Christmas, and of course he thought that this would be a very clever way to make it up, and none any the wiser. And so he took the cup and was only waiting to get to Exeter presently to make away with it. But he'd locked it up in the cabinet for the moment, and thought, no doubt, 'twas as safe there as if he'd hid it in his garden or up his chimney, or anywhere else."

"And the thing is to know what next," added Dicky Reep. "Be me and Arthur detectives or burglars?"

Well, I was pretty fully awake by now, and my mind moved very quick, as it generally do of a morning.

"'Tis in a nutshell," I said. "Him as got Edward Bickford back his cup was to receive five pound reward for so doing. That's quite clear to all parties, and the five pound be yours without a doubt; but the question is if you haven't gone and earned five years into the bargain. But things being what they are, 'tis quite certain to me that Forrester won't open his mouth very wide when the truth's out and he finds his cupboard empty this morning. He'll think 'twas burglars, and he'll only hope they've got off as clear as he could wish 'em."

"Be we to tell Edward the truth, or ban't we?" asked Richard. "Be we to explain everything that's happened when we take back the cup and claim the money? If we tell him the truth, then he may have the law of his brother and make a disturbance as will shake Cornwood to the depths; and if we don't tell him, then he'll reckon that me and Arthur was the robbers and only stole the cup to bring it back again, like a pair of dog-thieves."

"You might get the cup back to him in a crafty sort of way and say nought and not appear in it at all," I suggested. But the watchmender wouldn't hear of such a plan as that.

"Five pounds is five pounds," he said, "and we ban't going to fling away good money. For none can say that we haven't fairly earned it."

I allowed the truth of that; and, after two hours of talk, 'twas finally settled they should first make Edward Bickford promise on his word of honour that he wouldn't take no steps against the robber,

and then tell him who the robber was. And in addition to that, they meant to make him promise never to let out who'd recovered the property.

Of course there was the chance that Edward wouldn't believe 'em; but he did, and he made a plan to prove they spoke the truth, and found too surely that they did. Then the joy and gladness of the man at getting back his cup was cruel dashed when he found out who had taken it from him.

But anyway the trophy shone out again one evening in the bar, just as if nothing had happened; and them as knew kept so dumb as newts about it, and Edward merely said the case was all cleared up and it was to be kept dark for very good private reasons. And I will swear that neither him nor me ever squeaked about it. Yet out it got, as such things must, for both Haycraft and my son's friend, Reep, were married men, and so the whole truth and a good bit over was in everybody's mouth inside a month.

As for Forrester, he lost his nerve pretty bad, as we knew he would do, the first day that he come in the bar and saw the cup in its old place just as usual. A mouse could have blowed him off his feet, for worse than a ghost it was to him to find it there, no doubt. Of course he well knowed it had been stolen from him, but little guessed where next he'd catch sight of it. The hookem-snivey rascal stared at it as though it had been the Prince o' Darkness, and just said 'Oh!' and no more. Then out he bolted and quite forgot his drink, which my son's friend, Reep, drank instanter.

You see, Forrester had kept the burglary at his

house cruel quiet and gone on his usual way without a word to any but his wife. And even she bided mute as a mole over it. Then all came out, and a good hail of bitter laughter stung their ears.

It got to the Morley Clay Pits, of course; and then his authority and power of driving the labourers was gone; for if he blamed a clay-cutter, or chid even a trolley-boy, they'd look in the air cheeky as sparrows and say, "Wonder whoever 'twas took thicky silver cup to the Seven Stars!"

So then he felt that life weren't worth living like that and he'd do better to make another start in the world. Which he did, and him and his wife and his sons all up stick and off afore Lady-day come round.

'Twas said that Edward Bickford helped 'em in secret with a good bit of money, as he'd often done afore; and I dare say he did. For he was the very man to do so out of his great power of forgiveness and charity to his fellow-creatures.

XXI

A BARGAIN'S A BARGAIN

THERE WAS A GOOD BIT OF GLOOM cast over the village when Nat Bradley's poor wife went home. Because, you see, she took her own life most resolute. Of course, poor bird-witted woman, no blame attached to her. It were just 'suicide while in a state of insane mind,' because her brain was gone years and years afore she did the deed.

We was standing Bradley his liquor on the evening after the funeral, and he was a good bit cheered up by that time, and towards the end of the evening, when mellow, he even named an elderly female or two for future consideration. But before that our talk had touched not a few fellow-creatures here and there as was known to have took their own lives, and some men—Samuel Bonus and Farmer Jim Mumford among the number — stoutly held to it that no sane human ever yet did away with himself; whereas I—Tom Turtle, as be telling this tale—and Moses Butt, our silent member, and Peter Gurney, the farrier, and Gregory Snow, declared most steadfast that such was not the case. For 'twas common knowledge amongst us how a weak but sane creature once and again had cut

his throat to escape the consequences of his own folly, or bad luck, as the case might be. And Peter called home more stories than me, and could show also how 'tis gentlefolks that oftenest perform the rash act. In fact, he told the tale of Sir William Hawkford, Knight of the Bath, a learned judge of old time, as found life not worth living, and went out of it very clever by making his servant destroy him in all ignorance of what he did.

This judge had a great park, and in it was game and deer. And Sir William called the keeper to him and charged him with being a slack and lazy man, because the deer was being slain and stolen. So he rated the keeper very stern, and bade him be brisker in his nightly rounds, and have no parley with any poacher he might come upon, but, if such a man couldn't give account of himself, to shoot him at sight.

This the keeper undertook to do, on pain of losing his post, and soon enough he was called to keep his word. For there came a dark, wild winter's night, fit for trouble; and there, sure enough, under the light of a flying moon, the servant, on his rounds, discovered a strange figure walking in the park alone. He challenged, but got no answer; then, having warned the poor wretch that his life would pay the forfeit, fired upon him and dropped him in his tracks. The judge's self he slew—a very terrible deed, for certain. 'Twas thus Sir William chose to end his doleful days; and none blamed the keeper, I believe, and why should they? And none could honestly say the judge was mad.

But Bonus and Mumford, even after they'd heard this cunning tale, held that it proved

nothing than Sir William was out of his senses to have lighted on such a plan.

"'Tis the cruel wit of madness," said Bonus. "No man with all his intellects could have done such a clever thing. For he tried to cheat the Recording Angel, and who but a madman ever thought to do that?"

Then we all got arguing on the subject, and the talk ran so deep and wise that a man here and there forgot to drink his liquor. And when Johnny Rowland see'd his mugs and tankards standing still, he felt 'twas time to cut in and change the subject.

"Say what you will, souls, 'tis a bad deed, and history shows it," he declared. "Why for did our anticessors bury such rash and wilful creatures at a cross-roads with a stake drove through 'em? Why, to show what they thought of it; and, whatever the heathen may have done in their ignorance, 'tis quite clear us Christians didn't ought to have no truck with the subject. 'Tis a Christian crime to do murder on yourself, and 'tis just as cowardly to want to live longer than you ought as to want to live shorter. And that puts me in mind of a very funny story; so the sooner you get on with your liquor and light up your pipes again the better, for 'tis growing late."

With that he told the tale of Toby Brimblecombe, the son of the old white witch as lived to Rundlestone; and, being a thought quicker at a joke than my neighbours, I led the laughter; for 'tis a very funny tale, without any doubt, though you'd never think so from the beginning of it.

"This here Tobias Brimblecombe was a fuzz-cutter," began Rowland, "and he done his simple work very well, and crept through his life till

he was eight-and-thirty in a very proper way for such a terrible humble sort of man. But then things happened to him, as they will to the least of us, for I believe there's hardly anybody turned of fifty as can honestly say they haven't had one adventure.

"And Toby's adventure was over a woman. It began well, but turned out badly, as dealings with the women so often do when the men be built of weak stuff. If you be going to them, you must keep a stiff upper lip and a commanding eye and a manly tone in your voice. Let 'em know you'll stand no nonsense from the outset, for if they think you will, then nonsensical they'll be, according to the natural instinct and temper of them, and you'll smart for it. Just a pinch of fear goes to a happy marriage; and the fear's got to be on the woman's side, for if 'tis t'other, then you'll get a poor come-along-of-it and food for sneering, or laughter, or pity, according to the spectator's point of view."

"We don't forget you'm a bachelor, Johnny," said Gregory Snow; and then Rowland laughed his jolly laugh and went on.

"Well, Brimblecombe, reaching the ripe age of thirty-eight, dared to lift his eyes to a woman and offered for her against his mother's advice. But for once, being terrible excited at the brave idea of having a female for hisself, Tobias held on and courted her to the best of his poor powers, and won her. She was a draggle-tailed, good-natured creature so old as him, and she lived by gathering watercresses and selling them in Tavistock. She lodged along with a widow down to Merivale, and Susan Ellis was her name. If she'd been cleaned and rayed in tidy

clothes, she might have passed muster very well, but, as it was, her looked more like a mommet to fright the birds from the corn than a woman with hopes and fears and an immortal soul.

"Brown hair and a brown face and a mouth for ever laughing; for 'tis a trick of Providence, that balances all so fair, that them with least to laugh about do often laugh the most. And she accepted Toby Brimblecombe, and he bought her a new gown and made her give up gathering cresses, and insisted that she should keep her face clean.

"They ordained to wed when the man turned forty, and 'twas his idea it should be so, because there was a lot of small caution in his nature, and he judged that if they kept company for two years they'd get to know about each other's characters and larn a few things better larned afore marriage than after. 'Twas very wise, of course, but when trouble happened, and Toby's plans miscarried, he hadn't sense to see his luck, but cussed hisself something shocking for a thick-headed, short-sighted zany.

"In a word, the woman, Susan Ellis, got work at an inn—on the strength of her fine new gown and clean face, 'twas said. And she turned out a very good worker and a very soft-tongued, pleasant creature. Then her prosperity spoiled her, so far as poor Toby was concerned, and the very last thing as he counted upon began to happen. All was going well with him, and he thought more of Susan and was prouder of her than ever; but, as ill-luck would have it, owing to her increased prosperity and the larger experience of males that her work at the inn gave her, she began to see Toby wasn't the only man

in the world, and that, as a matter of harsh fact, he was a very poor pattern of husband in mind, body, and pocket.

"Even that wouldn't have done much harm, I suppose, but then there came along Anthony Frost, a widower of solid means. He farmed a tenement over to Postbridge, and was a cheerful, prosperous creature. I don't say 'twas honest, or fair, or a proper thing to do, but the strong will ride rough-shod over the weak till the end of time, and there be those who'll tell you 'tis a good thing they do; for if the weak had it all their own way, then the strong would be smothered out of the earth, and no doubt that would be a pity. We can't all copy the rabbits, of course.

"Be that as it may, Anthony, despite his grey whiskers and five-and-fifty years, was thrice the man poor Toby was; and he got Susan away from Toby, and he didn't want to wait two years, nor yet two minutes. So before Toby fairly realised what a shameful and unheard-of and scandalous thing had been done to him, his sweetheart was another man's wife.

"Susan told him all about it, and said she was cruel sorry, and awful ashamed of herself, and a lot more like that; but she was firm. She made it quite clear that she liked Tobias well, and was very grateful to him for all he'd done to lift her, and should always remember him with lively goodwill; but she found as she liked Anthony a lot better.

"'You can only live your life through once,' said Susan, 'and I feel that I'll suit Mr. Frost better than I'd suit you in the long run. And I'm sure the woman's born who'll make you

a fine useful wife yet. So I beg you'll seek her, and take no offence where none be intended.'

"'Tis a hard world, and of course people didn't shed many tears over Toby. The general feeling seemed to be that if he wasn't man enough to keep her, so much the worse for him and the better for the human race. Because the strongest male wins in Nature, and though among the upper folk, owing to money, and titles, and outside things like that, the women will marry any knock-kneed trash for the sake of what goes with him, among us of the land there's no bait on the hook more than Nature puts there, and, as a rule, 'tis the best man wins, because the women ban't dazzled with rubbish, like the pictures and gilt and glass hung outside a peep-show to draw the folk in.

"So Susan wedded the better man, and broke her word, and obeyed the call of Nature, and Tobias took on something dreadful, and gave out afore the face of the nation that he meant to do away with himself. Nobody worried much about that, not even his mother; and when I axed the old woman about it she said that I needn't fear for Tobias.

"'He's all right,' declared Mother Brimblecombe. 'I know Toby better than anybody else, and I know he ban't built to destroy himself any more than he be built to destroy you or me. His heart is soft, and though I grant this matter have hardened it a lot, and made a man of him a'most, yet it won't come to anything. He weren't created ever to win and keep a woman, and this is the best thing that could have happened, for she was a joyous, full-blooded thing, terrible hungry to get all she could out

of life. And Lord knows what her past was, or her future will be. In fact, as the man's mother, I was very glad when she dropped Toby, and I won't say, between you and me and the teapot, but that I may have had a bit to do with it behind the scenes. Anyway, in justice to Farmer Frost, I may tell you he called upon me a week before he asked Susan to throw over my son, and I told him to go right on, as the nature in him prompted, and that if the woman said 'Yes,' I should be the last to grumble, or do him any harm for his pains.'

"You see, Frost was a superstitious man, and if Toby's mother had threatened to overlook him and do him evil for taking Toby's girl, such was the belief in Mother Brimblecombe's powers among the older people at that time, that I don't think he'd have gone on.

"So there it stood, and Tobias let it be known high and low that he was going to kill hisself; and he told Susan the same a month after her marriage. In fact, he went all the way to Postbridge so to do; and Anthony Frost was home at the time, and made the poor chap come in and have his dinner along with them. He wouldn't take no denial, and Toby ate and drank; but he told Susan that it would work no difference to his plans, and that he was as determined as ever to kill himself, and the guilt and the ghost would be her portion. She bore up pretty well, and hoped as he'd play the man and think better of it; and then he w t home to his mother.

"The very day after, so I heard, a chap came up to see Toby at his work, fuzz-cutting, and the man was named Charlie Bates. Tobias

knew him. They were birds of a feather, and, if anything, Bates was simpler and humbler than Brimblecombe himself. A slack-twisted chap, with a poor little yellow beard you could see through, and silly blue eyes, and a round face like an owl. In fact, as I said the first time I saw him, you'd have expected to hear the man hoot rather than speak.

"They talked together, and Charlie explained as he'd heard about Toby's great intention, and wanted to know if 'twas true.

"'Yes, 'tis,' said the fuzz-cutter. 'I've been treated something shameful, and I ban't going to suffer it. I'm so good as a dead man, though I stand here talking to you this moment. And when I'm gone, the nation will ring with it.'

"'The bravery!' says Bates. 'To think of what a courageous chap you be! And when shall 'e do the rash act, Tobias?'

"'In my own time,' answers the other. 'I won't be accountable to anybody. I'll just go when I please.'

"'Will it be in a fortnight, I wonder?' asks Charles.

"'Maybe it will, and maybe it won't; and why for do you want to know?' answers back the doomed man.

"'Because I'm terrible wishful to get your job,' explains Charlie Bates. 'You see, me and my master, Mr. Maydew, are out, along of me letting a sow and her litter into the lettuce bed by an unfortunate accident. So I be going this day month; and if 'tis your terrible purpose to slay yourself inside that time, your master, Mr. Hannaford, will want a new fuzz-cutter, and that be work I'm very clever at.'

"'Ah, 'tis everybody for hisself in this world, I see!' says Toby, with great bitterness in his voice. 'And so I'll be for myself too. I haven't gived Hannaford notice yet, for I never thought of a little thing like that, standing, as I do, on the edge of the grave. But there 'tis—nobody does nothing for nothing nowadays. So you'd best tell me what you'll pay me if I give you the exact date.'

"'Don't you do that, for the Lord's sake!' says Charlie, bursting out in a perspiration all over. 'Because, if I knowed that, I'd feel called upon to tell the police, and you wouldn't like for me to do so.'

"But Toby didn't care.

"'Tell them so much as you please—I laugh at 'em! Why, inspector stopped me in Princetown a week ago, and a crowd came round in a minute, and I was the middle of it, and a marked man! And inspector, he warned me that if I persisted in taking my life the consequences might be very serious; and I snapped my fingers at the fellow, and told him that I didn't care no more for the consequences than a bird in a tree!'

"Charles considered then, because he didn't think it would have come to a question of cash about Toby's work. But evidently Brimblecombe wanted to get something out of the deal.

"'I suppose your idea is to spend a bit of money and have a final flare-up afore you go?' asked Bates; and Tobias, who hadn't thought of any such thing, remembered that 'tis an ill wind that bloweth nobody any good, and saw a way to turn a penny out of his misfortunes.

"'I won't name the day,' he answered, 'because, as you say, that might get on your conscience.

But this I can do. If you offer me enough money, I'll tell you to within a week when the thing shall be done.'

"Charles thought upon that. He had saved up five pound in the course of ten year or thereabouts, and 'twas in the Post Office Savings Bank, at his mercy to draw out if so he wished. He little liked to part from a penny of it, for they'd told him that it was gathering in money at interest, and he'd got a sort of foggy idea 'twould goody into a hundred for him if he lived long enough.

"'I'll give 'e ten bob to know the date within a week, Tobias,' he says; but his friend didn't think 'twas sufficient.

"'Make it twenty, and we'll talk about it,' he answered.

"Charlie tried for fifteen, but the dying man, as he called himself, was firm; and a few days later Bates brought Tobias a sovereign, and Toby told him that he might expect to hear the tragical news just after the August Bank Holiday. So they left it there, and the next thing Brimblecombe got was a message from old Gammer Grimbal at Princetown—a bedridden creature, who preserved great faith and patience under her sufferings. She sent for Tobias, and he went, and she earnestly begged him to repent of his intention, but said, if he wasn't going to repent, that he might do her a service. And he asked her what 'twas, and she told him she much wanted a message took to her soldier son—him as fell into the sea and was drowned when drunk at Plymouth ten year afore.

"'You'll be going to the same place as him, Toby,' said poor Mrs. Grimbal, 'and there you

and the likes of you will have to work out your salvation with fear and trembling; and for my dear son's sake I'd much wish you to carry a message to him, to cheer him and lift his thoughts to the love of the watching Lord, who forgets none, saint and sinner alike. I want you to take him glad tidings of hope from his old mother; and if you consent to do it I'll give you two sovereigns that you can leave to your friends in your will.'

"A queer sort of offer, and it shows how a good mother never forgets her childer, and stretches out her hand to them and her heart likewise, even though they may be sadly gone before into the darkness of doubt, and took off at a time when they was but little ready to answer to their Maker for the precious gift of life.

"Toby felt terrible pleased, and promised to carry the mother's words, and took her money. He didn't make a will, however, because he very well knowed there would be nothing to leave under it; but he made away with the two pounds; and he made away with Charlie's one, and he let hisself go pretty reckless, and spent the cash on liquor and got into bad company, all within a fortnight of time. In fact, Mr. Hannaford very near saved him the trouble of giving notice, for he was much tempted to sack the man owing to his riotous living. But he was a just creature, and gave his servant another chance. So August Bank Holiday came and went, and there was Tobias more alive than ever he'd been afore, you might say, while in secret both Bates and Gammer Grimbal began to tremble for their money.

"Half-way through August, Charlie reckoned

'twas about time to make inquiries. His work was running short with Farmer Maydew, and he began to feel most strongly that Tobias ought to go, or else give back the cash he'd had. And about the same time Gammer Grimbal sent a message to Brimblecombe that she'd very much like to have a bit of a talk with him at his convenience. You see, poor thing, she was cut in half between the thought of getting a straight message to her dead boy and the sad idea of how 'twould have to reach him. And though honestly glad that Tobias had changed his mind, and meant, as she hoped, to justify his existence afore it ended in a natural manner, yet she felt, if he did that, in common justice her two pound did ought to be returned.

"However, she had to whistle for it, because his trouble had made Brimblecombe a hard-hearted and lawless sort of fool, as happens with some natures. Trouble sweetens the better sort, but it only sours the worst, and from being a mere harmless nobody, his wrongs had turned Tobias into a reckless toad, with the sense of ill-treatment so strong in him that it led to his ill-treatment of other people. He'd been hit heavy, and he didn't care a button who 'twas he hit back, even though it might be an old bedridden woman. Such was his fall. So he didn't pay no heed to Mrs. Grimbal's message, and never went near her, and still carried on in a very rash sort of way. But he couldn't escape from Bates. In fact, Charlie was at him morning, noon, and night. He catched Tobias one evening coming back from work, and, being angered by now for his money, talked straight about it. Indeed, they had some pretty fiery words on the subject.

"'I'm tired of this,' says Charlie. 'Here's September in sight a'most, and nothing done. A bargain's a bargain, Tobias Brimblecombe, and if you ban't going to give Mr. Hannaford notice, then you can give me back my money, and the sooner you do, the better pleased I shall be about it.'

"'You ought to blush for yourself,' answered Toby, 'a cruel, heartless devil that you are! You'd hound me out of the world and dance on my grave, no doubt! 'Tis shameful to think that a human being can desire another's death like you want mine. And you call yourself a Christian man!'

"'Not at all—not at all,' replied t'other. 'All I say is, a bargain's a bargain, and I'm sick of your dishonest ways. Every time I meet you and ax you when 'tis to be, you make some paltry excuse.'

"'You'd hurry me out of life,' cried Brimblecombe again, 'and such as you ought to be put away yourselves! 'Tis a sin and a scandal to do it, and me with an old mother and everything! But you needn't fear, Charles; I'm going in my good time. I don't want to live; 'tis only for the sake of others that I hang on. I shall be off presently—afore pheasant-shooting begins, without a doubt.'

"'A bargain's a bargain,' whined Charlie again. 'You said 'twas to be after August Bank Holiday when I gave you my money, and now 'tisn't to be carried out till October. You'm a very unsporting sort of man, and what becomes of me in the meantime? Here be I out of work on September the third, and ready for your job. 'Twas a clear understanding, surely? You got

my money under false pretences, Tobias, and that puts you in reach of the law; and if you don't give it back, I'll tell policeman about you—see if I don't!'

"They wrangled a bit more, and Toby said that a policeman was very small beer in the eye of a man who would soon be standing afore the Recording Angel. Then he asked Charlie for another ten bob to hurry him up; and Charles properly lost his temper at that, and said as Brimblecombe was adding insult to injury, and must take him for a born fool—which, of course, was what Tobias and everybody else did do.

"However, he wouldn't drop no more money, and the men parted, to meet again under very strange circumstances a fortnight later, when the end of the tale came to be told.

"During that time Toby cast good behaviour away altogether, and let himself go to the dogs, and disgraced himself to Tavistock Market, and got the sack for good and all. Hannaford warned him against his evil ways, gave him his money, and bade him begone. So there he was, and he thought to make capital out of it with Bates, and went straight off to Sampford Spiney, where Bates lived to, and asked for the man. The first of September, it chanced to be, and he heard that Charlie was out on the Moor, along with his master, snipe-shooting. He walked out according, because he thought to have a tell with Charles behind his master's back; but then, in the dimpsy of the evening, who should he see but Bates coming back through Walla Valley by himself? Charles carried a game-bag and a gun, and he explained that Mr. Maydew had met a friend and was going home another way.

"'"'Tis my last day with him,' said Bates, 'and to-morrow I be loose on the world, and all your fault.'

"'"Pitch upon this stone,' answers Toby, 'and we'll have a tell. A proper gun, sure enough.'

"He fingered Mr. Maydew's fowling-piece a minute. Then a wicked thought come in his head, and he acted according.

"'"'Tis all over, Charles,' he began. 'My thread's spun, and I shall be a dead man out of mind afore you go to church next Sunday. I give the man Hannaford notice to-night, and if you travel up over to-morrow forenoon I've no doubt he'll be very glad for to see you and take you on at my money.'

"Bates could hardly believe his ears or his luck at that, and he got very excited and friendly about it.

"'"I always knowed you was a man of your word, and straight, and to be relied upon,' he said. 'When a chap here and there laughed, and told me I'd done a foolish thing, I held out that you'd keep your word, and that I was safe to trust you.'

"'"Certainly, certainly,' answers Toby. 'It's all over, and the better the day the better the deed, as they say. You'll be in good work again afore you know it, and Hannaford can be trusted. I've thought it all out very careful, and I've weighed drowning against hanging, and poison against shooting. 'Tis to be shooting, Charles. I was going to borrow old 'Moleskin's' gun to-morrow, but you've saved me the trouble, because this one in my hand will do very well. 'Tis loaded, I see.'

"Well, there's no doubt Bates felt fearful then,

but he didn't feel so fearful as you might think. He knowed what a slippery customer Brimblecombe was got to be, and it come to him very forcible that he'd better strike while the iron was hot, and not strain his conscience to breaking at such a moment. 'A bargain's a bargain,' he kept saying to himself; and that supported him through the ordeal.

"'If you will, you will, Tobias,' he answered; 'but I hope you don't think none the worse of me, or blame me in the matter.'

"'Not at all,' declared Toby. 'Why should I? You can't prevent what I'm going to do. Nothing can—'tis all over bar the shooting. And if you wouldn't let me have this gun, I should only go to 'Moleskin,' the poacher, and borrow his. So what you have got to say is this: You meet me and have a tell, and I admire this here fowler's gun, and say 'tis the best I've ever seen. Then I say I'd dearly like to pull trigger, and you forbid it. But, as the stronger man, I override you, and tell you to bide where you be while I go up over the river through yonder bottom and try for a rabbit. You can't stop me, and I go. Then you hear the gun fire, after waiting twenty minutes or thereabout, and then you expect me to come back again. You sit on very patient till the darkness comes down, but then you get uneasy and set off to seek me. And then you find my mortal dust all scat to atoms—a terrible gashly sight—and then you run home for dear life and blaze it abroad, so as all the people shall hear I be gone at last!'

"Charles shook in his shoon at that. 'I shall never have the courage to do it,' he said. But Toby laughed at him. 'You silly mumphead,'

he answered, 'what courage do you need to give the alarm about it? Why, if you be frighted to see a dead corpse, you needn't come across the river at all. You can just wait till you hear the shot, then you'll know I be gone, and you can run off and say you've seen me a dead un. Under yonder tree—the tall one with they hollies next to it—you'll find me stretched out. And now I'll wish you good-bye. And if you mean well to me, Charles, you can go up over to-night and break it to my poor dear mother.'

"Bates was much relieved that he needn't see Toby's carcass, and he promised faithful that he'd let Mother Brimblecombe know that very night, so soon as ever her son was gone.

"So Tobias shook Charlie's hand and went off, and the other was thrown into a terrible state of fear and distress. But he let the man go to his doom, and presently he sat humped up on a stone by the water, listening, half in hope and half in fear, for the fatal sound. At last it came with a bang, and Bates felt as if the shot had gone through his own head. And then he felt as if he was a murderer and had slain t'other with his own hand. 'Twas some minutes afore he could move, for the sound of gunfire had glued his limbs to the rock on which he squatted; but at last he wrenched himself up and rushed away to Sampford Spiney, and cried out the fatal news how Toby Brimblecombe had fallen in with him and borrowed Mr. Maydew's gun to shoot a rabbit, and turned it on himself and done the fearful deed he'd threatened.

"'Where be my gun, anyway?' asks Farmer Maydew, when he come to hear of it, for that was all that interested him.

"And Charles he says: 'The gun be fallen alongside the corpse, and I didn't dare to touch un for fear of breaking the law.'

"You'll guess the sequel, I dare say. The gun was worth forty pound, and Tobias he got twenty-five by it. They traced him to Plymouth, and found the gunsmith that bought the gun. But no more was seen of Brimblecombe; and, though the people believed his mother knew all about him, she vowed most steadfast that she did not.

"'Tis a curious story of how trouble found the fighting power in a harmless man and made him show himself. Unfortunately, what he had to show weren't much good to the community, and it would have been far better if trouble had never over-got the chap and led him into bad courses. But I dare say he's reformed long ago, if still alive, and making up by goodness for his naughty deeds. Us'll hope so."

XXII

TRIUMPH OF GEORGE

THE TALE RUNS BACK A LONG WAY, for when her great adventure overtook her Mercy Mayne was up home twenty-eight years old. Her mother and me, you see, had been dear friends from our childhood, and life crossed us both and our sorrows drew us together.

I was near five years older than Susan Sanders, and when I married Ned Pritchard, the gamekeeper, she was feared of her life she wouldn't be the apple of my eye no more. But her dread was groundless, because I never had no family myself, nor yet any luck with my husband. One of the salt of the earth was Ned, and it weren't along of nothing ever he did that my luck was out; but he went and died after we'd been married four year, and such was my great respect and affection for him that I couldn't take another. Not but I might have, for I was a fine piece at thirty year old, and a good few offered for me.

However, I inclined to the single state, and presently it was my turn to fear the loss of Susan Sanders, for, though we were heart to heart again, love of man overtook her, and, as ill-fortune would have it, the man was Thomas Mayne.

Nobody thought 'twas ill-fortune at the time,

of course, because Mayne hadn't got a bad mark against him. Shepherd to Farmer Ford he was, a very clever man with sheep. But I can always say from the first I didn't feel too sure of him. He was impatient with us everyday people and never could suffer fools gladly. And though my dear Susan was far ways off from being a fool, she hadn't no more brains than, please God, she should have, and she never did learn how to cook in a way to please a man. For there be a great gulf fixed between what a man likes to eat and what contents a woman. If there was no men, there would be no cooking worth the name. Us can scramble along on any odds and ends, and just peck a bit when we're hungry and care nought about meals on the grand scale; but not so men. They like to think of their food afore it comes, and they like to forget it the minute 'tis gone, and that means cooking. And a man with the indigestion is a parlous neighbour till he's better.

So Thomas and Susan married, and the gilt was terrible soon off the gingerbread, for, as ill-luck would have it, Mayne turned out a greedy man, and his wife's cooking cast him down a lot from the start. Then, along of her disappointment at finding marriage far ways off what she'd hoped, the poor girl wilted and took ill. There was consumption in her family, and a few months after her little daughter came in the world her eyes grew so bright as stars and she began to cough.

I ban't one to meet trouble half-way, and no more ban't my old bachelor brother, who lives along with me. In fact, George have always boasted himself to have a rare nose for trouble, and never man was cleverer at escaping from it than him. A most affectionate man by nature,

yet that cautious he never would get fond of nothing, or nobody, for fear of death taking the party away from him. He wouldn't marry, and he wouldn't so much as keep a dog lest the death of the creature should tear his heart-strings. But a cat he never minded round the house, because he weren't addicted to 'em, and the nicest-mannered cat was never known to win him. At seventy-five year old the only cloud in his uneventful days was the thought that I might go to ground afore he do. Then he'd have met the common fate at last, and grieve and miss a fellow-creature.

Well, George he marked the danger signals in poor Susan, and he warned me I must be prepared to face the pang of parting.

"She's a goner," said George, "and if it wasn't libellous I'd whisper her husband have helped the bad work."

Too true I knew it was, for the shepherd hadn't shone as husband, nor yet father. He'd said openly, afore neighbours in the bar of the Wheatsheaf, that he wished his cake was dough again and him a bachelor; and far beyond Goldcross —our village—he'd uttered the same shameful wish; and, of course, it got back to his wife, as such things always do, and I heard my dear little Susan say, with my own ears, that she didn't want to live no more, because she'd failed with Thomas. He'd wished for a boy, too, and she brought him a girl, and, though as nice a little maid in her temper and manners as you'd expect in a new-born creature, she was out of the common plain. In fact, an uglier baby than what Mercy Mayne was you might go far to find, and though we all made light of it and said the homely

infants always grow up to be the prettiest boys and girls, there was a right-down hopeless look about Mercy from the first. Her poor mother loved her, but her father did not, and he went so far as to say that in a proper civilised land Mercy would have been put away so soon as she was baptized and allowed to make a fresh start in a happier world than this!

That was the sort of man Thomas Mayne proved to be under the test of marriage, and then far worse happened, and the fearful inner nature of the villain appeared. Instead of softening the lot of that dying woman and putting a bold face on his fate, like any brave and decent chap who'd drawn a blank, he done a cowardly and unchristian thing and bolted! You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard it; but not so my brother. He'd known that Thomas was going about saying he might very likely 'cut a loss'—to use his own expression. And then he did cut out of Goldcross and vanished like the dew of the morning. A pretty good hue-and-cry was made, and Farmer Ford spent five pounds in trying to find the man; but he'd looked ahead and covered his tracks very clever indeed, and never sight or sound of the hard-hearted wretch rewarded inquiry.

It hastened the end of Susan by a year, I dare say, for he'd left no provision for the girl or her child, and it would have meant the union workhouse for both of 'em; but by God's goodness there was me and George in our own little home, and I will say for George, though a marvel at escaping trouble, he never raised no question when I ordained to take in Susan and let her close her eyes along with us. His only fear was he'd

get fond of the babe; but him being well over sixty at the time, and Mercy an infant under a year, it looked in nature she'd never leave him, unless she'd got the seeds of death in her through her mother.

That didn't happen, however, and us soon forgot the handicap of her poor looks, because she had a heart of gold, and took especial to George from the time she learned to walk and talk. And his affectionate nature, what he'd pent up all his life, went out to Mercy, and long after, when the tragedy threatened, my brother was face to face, after all, with the trouble no human creature can ever escape in this vale, do what he will to shirk it.

Poor Mrs. Mayne bided a year along with us, and never a word from her wicked husband; but the end was in sight from the first, and she went in her sleep at last. The baby was too young to know what she'd lost, and when came the question of the little one's future I only said one word to George.

"Susan left her to me," I said. "'Twas all in the world she had to leave, for that matter, and you may call Mercy Mayne a gift, or a sacred trust, whichever you please, but here she is, and here she bides."

"May you be rewarded," George answered me, and the time came when we both was, for the child took to her foster-parent from the first and fell into the way of calling me 'mother,' for that matter. We was very scantily off for relations in any case, and by the time Mercy grew to be ten years of age, there was none but an orphan nephew, Ted Banks by name, who had any claim upon us.

By then, however, we'd long grown to feel Mercy was our own, and as the years passed she became so near as any daughter could have been, and a lot dearer than most young daughters you see nowadays. For she was the old-fashioned type that respect their elders and reckon age be worthy of kind treatment. Indeed, she was a most grateful pattern of girl, and when us adopted her, and gave her to understand we stood in place of relations, she never could be enough obliged. She did her part to spare me, and proved a quick learner and so clean as a new pin; and when her schooling was finished, though as a scholar she never shone, she was well content to settle in the home and do her part and not hanker for nothing better. Mercy grew up so plain as need be—no blemishes, you understand, and a very fine set of teeth, which often save the situation for a face, but just general all-round poor looks. Her face was round as a ball and her eyes were so small as a rat's, and her nose was snubby and her mouth so large as a door, yet a nice kindly expression she had and a very trusting manner.

"There's one bright thing about our Mercy," George used to say; "we shan't lose her."

But I never shared his confidence. "A wise man might take her for her temper," I'd tell my brother, "and a crafty one might offer for her prospects. She'll be tolerable snug when we're called home, and there's men in Goldcross—and everywhere else for that matter—as would swallow any pill if it was coated with enough sugar. Another thing," I told George, "Mercy have all a woman's feelings, and she could love a man as dearly and faithfully as the comeliest girl in the parish; and if one did come along she'd be

so properly surprised and so terrible grateful, you may be sure she'd take him whether we approved or whether we did not."

"Rest content," he said. "If ever a woman had 'old maid' stamped upon her face, 'tis our Mercy."

It looked as if George was going to be right, and when our maiden turned eight-and-twenty even I felt the danger might be said to have passed; but far from it. At that critical age, when you might have said hope was dead, Mercy Mayne had her hand read by a gipsy woman at Okehampton Fair, and the wicked creature told her she'd live to see her grandchildren. And on top of that came William Friend; and when she broke the fatal news that she was walking with him, I never seed a more triumphant girl.

Billy Friend was one of they ginger-red men with yellow eyelashes; and George, in a long life, had found that such a man was never to be trusted.

"If I seed a bishop with yellow eyelashes, I wouldn't repose no faith in him," George said to Mercy; "and, whether or no, Friend be long ways short of the worst bishop ever was known. He's a downy bird, and you won't hear no good about him from anybody but himself."

Friend worked at a pottery a mile from our house, where he threw clay on the wheel, and nobody doubted his cleverness at that; but he gave you the impression of a man you couldn't rely upon, and he was very vague on all serious subjects and apt to make jokes that nice people didn't hold with. A big man with blue eyes and a quiet sort of voice; but a determined customer. He was a foreigner to Goldcross, and it was give out by him he'd come from Bristol.

He came to tea two Sundays running, and me and George sized him up, while Mercy ministered to him as if he was a being from a better world than ours. I could see they'd gone a good bit farther in their courting than we was supposed to know, and I also marked that the man had the confidence of victory already. He knew he'd got Mercy all right, and he didn't pretend no pride over it neither; but where he did show interest was in me and George, and he took a good bit of pains to come round us. I wouldn't say but what he might have bested me, for he had a large choice of words and a clever way to praise the things about me that be worthy of praise. He'd listen and look as if he was interested, and when he heard I'd made our Sunday cake, he attended to it and pointed out where it stood a good bit above such things in general. And the second time he came he fetched me a very pretty little flame-new teapot from his works. It was red clay with a daffodil painted so large as life upon it, and the well-known words, 'The cup that cheers.'

So, but for George, I'm free to confess I might have weakened; but he didn't hoodwink my brother, and I knew from the first the battle would be there. Mercy took Mr. Friend to church for evening prayer the second time he came ; and he went at her wish, but not at his own.

"Mark that," said George, after they'd gone. "When Mercy said 'church,' the man's face fell a yard. And 'tis all very clever for him to praise your tea, but how much did he drink? I never trust a man that shies at his tea, because you well know that means his thirst be quenched in other ways."

He said a good deal more against Billy Friend and wouldn't hear nothing for him. He'd made inquiries, you see, and the general feeling ran a bit against the potter. Nobody could say anything right-down dangerous of the man, but there was an impression he carried a lot up his sleeve and might be thought no companion for youth. He played cards and he always won, and he played billiards at the Wheatsheaf and seldom lost, and, though he'd always take a drink gratis and for nothing, he proved a good deal absent-minded when it came to his turn to stand a round.

"Well," I said, after one of our long arguments, "Mercy's a growed woman, and I'm blessed if I can see what power us have got against her."

And George grew vexed and spoke harsh; but there it was, and the day after he'd heard old Norcott at the works say that Billy Friend was wicked at heart, and had only come to Goldcross to hide from his past, Mercy told us all in a flutter that she'd taken the man. And, for once, she looked very near pretty, because love will act like a charm and put its own passing beauty into any face while it lasts.

George let her run on, but his silence soon quieted down Mercy Mayne, and when she waited for us to speak she heard all the truth and the prophets from my brother. For the first and last time there was words between 'em, and Mercy wept all night and was uglier than ever the next morning; and George lost his sleep, for I didn't hear him snore once, though as a rule he trumpets steady from the small hours till cock-light. And next day he came to breakfast in his best clothes and very down-daunted.

"I be going to market town," he told me, and

'twas a thing he often did when he was restless; so he went to Okehampton till evening, and I had Mercy on my hands all day.

She was quite determined, and when I pointed out that the man had only took her for her prospects she quarrelled bitter sharp with me, and said I was no true mother to her, else I'd not have let myself say such a cruel thing. And I felt that a good deal.

"Lord love you," I said, "be sensible, Mercy Mayne. Nobody cares for you like me and your Uncle George, and we worship the ground you walk on; but truth's truth," I told the poor woman, "and 'tis your beautiful inner nature we love, and your big heart and your fine feelings and high religious opinions. God's given you what be far more precious than a pretty face, and we should hate for all your wonderful gifts to be run to waste on a man like William Friend."

But her answer showed only too clear how rightly George had figured up the potter.

"Billy knows all about my gifts," said Mercy. "He don't undervalue me, and, what's more, he admires me. He likes my looks, and he says my eyes be a beautiful and speaking pair, and my hair's the colour he best loves. And he's always reminded of it when he's throwing clay on the wheel. So now then!"

Of course I could say no more, because if the cunning rascal had called her beautiful, then 'twas all over with Mercy Mayne. A girl would rather be thought handsome than good any day of the week, and if Billy had let on she was nice to his eye, he'd got her body and soul, since the woman could find herself fool enough to believe him.

However, 'tis always darkest before dawn, and the watching Providence hadn't no mind to let Mercy follow her mother into an unhappy marriage. So, at least, it turned out, thanks to the amazing wit of George; but 'twas some time before he rose to his great stroke, and meanwhile for a good week the future looked terrible dark and we felt that our dear girl might be lost.

My brother came back from his day off pretty quiet, but I, who knew him so well, felt there was a lot hidden. Something had happened to him, and I couldn't tell whether he'd got good news or bad, but inclined to think 'twas bad. He looked on Mercy with melancholy eyes, but was quite civil and spoke but little till she'd kissed the pair of us 'Good-night' and gone to her chamber.

Then George fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and fetched out a bit he'd tore off a newspaper, and told me a most amazing tale.

At first it only looked as if Mercy Mayne was doomed worse than ever, for that had happened which might put up her market value by thousands of pounds, and I own, when George told me of his discovery, I felt hope slipping away; but that was where he came out a lot stronger and cleverer than me, and not till a week later, when his great course of action flashed on my brother, did I realise the heights of the man.

He'd found a newspaper in the bar of the inn where he took his dinner that day, and looking through the advertisements, which was the only part of a newspaper he was ever known to read, he came on the name of Thomas Mayne. More than five-and-twenty years had passed since poor Susan's husband bolted, and few remembered

him; but there he was, or rather there he was not, for he'd died three months before out in Australia, and he'd turned his thoughts home at the last, seemingly.

Some London folk, by the name of Messrs. Adshead and Frost, was advertising in *The Western Morning News* and saying that if there was relations of the late Thomas Mayne, sometime of Goldcross, Devon, who had died at Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, they might hear of news to their advantage if they was to communicate.

"'Tis in a nutshell," said George. "The man cut his stick and went foreign; and out there he have flourished like the green bay tree, as the ungodly will, and now his thread's spun and at the last he turned his thoughts to his wronged wife and child."

"And Mercy may be in for a fortune," I said.

George was just so gloomy as me for a good bit, because, of course, the fatal thing couldn't be kept from her, else our consciences would have ate us alive; but it meant on the face of it that Billy Friend would triumph and poor Mercy reap a bitter harvest in the long run.

Us talked unbeknownst to the woman for three nights, and then George ordained to make a move.

"The first thing," he said, "is to get news, and so I'll write to these people, and tell 'em that Thomas Mayne's wife be dead and his only daughter living. They can prove the truth of the matter, and 'tis all plain sailing, for Mayne hadn't no other relations to my certain knowledge."

With that he wrote to the lawyers and received a very civil reply. They proposed to send a clerk down to look into details and see that

Mayne's marriage was regular and so on; and they told us there was a matter of eight thousand pounds and two small houses in Sydney, which might be sold for another five hundred. Mayne hadn't no particular friends out there. He'd made his money wool-growing, and, when he was struck with death, let it be understood he had a wife and child at home so far as he could tell. And if alive they was to have the money.

And then, at the darkest hour, you may say, when it looked like 'Good-bye' for ever to our Mercy, and I began to ax myself what life would be like without her, George heard the Voice of Providence whispering to him and rose to his great feat.

Like all fine ideas, it come in a flash, and, from being two of the most troubled folk in the parish, we cherished a great new hope; and George was hopefuller even than me.

"Instead of this here money being a curse in disguise," said George, "I've got to see 'tis much more like the ram caught in the thicket that saved the holy Isaac; and if I do as I hope, then the money will prevent the sacrifice of Mercy Mayne and do a sight better for her than land her with William Friend. In fact, this fortune, rightly handled, be going to free her from the man and show her the truth of him."

'Twas a dark saying to me, but I couldn't doubt George, and presently he took his great step all unknown to Mercy.

He come in one night with the light of victory in his eye, and when I axed what good thing had overtook him he said nought till we was alone, and then poured himself out a second nightcap—a thing he only did on rare occasions.

"I've sowed the seed," began my brother, when Mercy was gone to bed. "I've been so deep as a well to-day, woman, and amazed myself with my own cleverness. But well I know 'twas put in me to speak, for I'd never have rose to kindiddle a cunning file like Billy Friend without help from Above."

"Spoke to him!" I said. "My life, George, you haven't let it out to him afore you've told Mercy herself?"

"No—far from it," he answered; "but I've let something out to him. I've given him a powerful lot to think about, I can assure you. And if I don't know what he'll do when he have thought about it, then call me a zany."

Well, George, you see, had contrived to fall in with Billy and meet him in a friendly temper and bid him into the Wheatsheaf for a drink. Over their glasses he'd talked and Billy had listened; and I'd have given a year of my life to hear George play-acting to the young man, for you never would have guessed that the power to do such a thing was hid in any member of our family.

"What's this I hear tell of you and our Mercy being tokened?" asks George, and Billy said it was so.

"I'm proud to tell you she's took me, Mr. Medlicott," says Friend, "and I hope and trust that you and your good sister will take it in a kind spirit. A fearful loss for you, I well know; but you won't lose her affection, and you'll gain mine, and I'm very wishful to be a good son-in-law to you in a manner of speaking."

"A most proper thought, Billy," answered George, so pleasant as you please, and the younger

little knew my brother was full of craft; but, finding him so amiable, he ran on.

"'Tis a case of love at first sight," said Billy Friend. "The moment I see Mercy I said, 'That's the girl for my money.'"

And George knew then he was a liar, even if he'd doubted it afore, because no human male in his right senses could have falled in love with our Mercy at first sight. But my brother struck in now and picked up Billy's words.

"She may be the girl for your money," he said, "and I've no quarrel with that. And if you see her many virtues and power of cleverness, so much the better. She's well worth your money, or any man's; but, as between friends, I want you to understand you're not the man for her money."

Billy put down his mug.

"And why not, Mr. Medlicott?" he inquired.

"For the reason that up to the present she ain't got none," explained George. "'Tis like this, Billy—and I should be very sorry for you to labour under a mistake. In your case, being love at first sight, I can speak open and without fear of hurting your feelings, because I well know you want the woman for herself, and money don't enter into the question at all. 'Tis just our Mercy your heart be set on; but I like all above board, and so I'm just telling you that my sister and me leave our bit to my only nephew, Teddy Banks, the gardener."

"Mercy Mayne told me different," said Mr. Friend, and the light had gone out of his eye by now.

"Then you can tell her different next time you fall in with her," answered George. "She's a wonder, and a treasure and the joy of our old

lives; but be it as it may, blood's thicker than water when a man comes to make his will, and my nephew Ted gets my house and chips when me and sister be done with 'em."

Then George went his way very cheerful, and Billy so far forgot his manners as to bide dumb and not wish my brother 'Good evening.'

"So there it stands," declared George; 'and if I've strained the truth I hope God'll forgive me, for I be sure I'm right. Mercy will have millions more money now than ever us could give her, and neither me nor you have any quarrel with Teddy. So there it stands, and we've got the potter in a cleft stick."

Then the light burst in on me also, and I gave George the credit for his amazing deepness.

"Mark me," he said, "this lets out Friend all right, and in twenty-four hours you must be prepared to hear our Mercy say some pretty hard things to us. For a nasty shock be coming to her; but then we'll tell her about the ram caught in the thicket, and show her how the ways of Providence can always be trusted if we only do our part."

"And not only that," I answered George, "for there's going to be a dazzling light on Billy Friend also. And us'll soon see what his love at first sight was worth."

In fact, you might say George cast an illumination all round. He was properly transfigured, in a manner of speaking, and many and many a day afterwards, when my brother seemed to be no cleverer than anybody else, I'd remind myself of his masterpiece and laugh at commonplace people who thought he was just a silly old man, same as other old men.

Two days after Billy had got his bit of news he showed the cloven hoof, of course, and we had a painful time with Mercy Mayne. In fact, she came home weeping like a river and saying the man had throwed her over. And she weren't blaming him so much as us at first, till George argued with her and showed her the truth. Because Friend was quite well off and, as a potter of great skill, got big money. He could have well afforded to wed a pauper, and the fact that he broke his solemn word, on finding that Mercy wouldn't bring nothing but herself, showed that the powder weren't no use to Billy Friend without the jam.

"You must grasp that afore I tell you something else," said George to Mercy. "You must feel quite clear in your mind, my dear, that he wanted you for your prospects, first and last and always, and that, when the prospects was gone, Master Billy was gone also. And that's both ends and the middle of it," he told her.

"I see that, and no doubt, so far as he's concerned, I've had a merciful escape," she answered. "I'm not standing up for Friend no more, because he's a liar, and now I can call home half a hundred lies he's told me. But what I ax to know next be why you've turned me down for your nephew, after leading me to understand all these years I was your foster-daughter and to be treated like your own and your only one. It bain't the house and the money," went on Mercy, "but it cuts me to the heart to think I ain't nothing to you after all, and you can put Ted first and leave me to shift for myself."

With that Mercy Mayne cried harder than ever,

and George put her out of her misery so quick as words could do it.

"Right well me and sister know you've earned every penny of our money, and we've entertained an angel unawares in you and been the richer for having you along with us," he said. "You're entitled to the lot, and I'll go further and say that if you claim the lot after what I be going to tell you I'll throw up my hand and let you have all and Teddy nought. But you must understand the Lord have brought 'deep things out of darkness,' and all on your account, Mercy Mayne, and you sit there now a richer woman by far than me and your foster-mother put together!"

"Perhaps you'll explain," she said; and George done so, and laid her amazing fortune afore her.

Mercy took it in a very cheerful spirit indeed, and she had the fine sense to see the way George had shone, and how, knowing about her money, he was able to lay the trap for Billy Friend. And Mercy did another nice thing: she insisted that my brother should keep his word and that our nephew should be heir to all we had. And it was so.

"I got better luck out of losing your stuff than if I'd kept it," she said, "and it won't make no difference at all to me, though very like I'll buy this house from Teddy Banks when you be took, for I can't see myself in no place else."

George and me marked a dangerous side, however, for with all her money we guessed she might be a target for the money-hunting pattern of men; but our fear was in vain.

"I loved Friend," she told me once. "True as this hand, I loved the man; but now I know what they are, I never won't look at another."

And she never have, and that's five year agone, though sometimes I can't help thinking she may turn to Teddy in her middle age, when we be took. He's a very plain fashion of man and be grown bald before his time; but he's honest and very clean in his habits, and has a great respect for Mercy Mayne. So, if 'tis only for the sake of the house, it may happen.

THE END

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